The First and the Last

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The First and the Last

by SweetStugLife

Summary
Alpha Ellen Harvelle and her Beta mate, Bobby, have four children: their daughter Jo, a Beta who hides physical and mental scars; their godsons Sam and Dean, a Beta and Omega who came to live with the Harvelles when the search for their mother's killer ended with their father's disappearance; and their ward Charlie, a Beta who escaped the Romans, an all-Alpha pack that traffics underage Betas and Omegas under the guise of an adoption agency.

The night before Sam's wedding to Jess, an Alpha named Castiel stumbles into the Roadhouse carrying Kevin Tran, an Omega xenogloss who he helped escape from the Romans. A member of the large and powerful Shurley pack, Castiel, aided by some of his siblings, has dedicated his life to rescuing children from the Romans, and the Harvelles, along with their friends, ally themselves with his crusade to fight against not only trafficking of the "lower types", but the social attitudes that allow all forms of type-based prejudice to exist.

But the Romans aren't going down easy. Nor are they the only obstacle to equality, and as Castiel's movement gains traction, he and his allies come to find that they have enemies in their own families, and in themselves.
Nightmares

Sam woke up when Charlie opened the door, allowing the dim light of the hallway to spill into the bedroom and land on the side of his face, tapping at the corner of his eye.

“Um…Sam?”

“What’s wrong?” Sam lifted his head a little, peering over the mass of blonde hair tucked under his chin.

“I had a nightmare.”

Of course. Why else would she come crawling into their room at ass o’clock, looking shrunken and cold, half folded in on herself?

“I’ve got Jess here,” Sam said. Strictly speaking Jess should have been in her own house, but Dean allowed her to spend the night with Sam on the condition that she didn’t snore. “Bed’s not big enough…Dean?” He knew his brother would be awake, and Dean didn’t prove him wrong. He slept a lot lighter than Sam, and he’d heard Charlie’s footsteps in the hallway and smelled her when she got to the door. At the sound of his name he cracked an eye open.

“I can sleep on the floor,” Charlie offered sheepishly. “I just didn’t want to be alone…”

“Charlene Carrie Harvelle, shut your mouth and get your ass in this bed right now,” Dean said, pressing his face into his pillow.

“Oh my,” Charlie said, with a weak grin. “I didn’t know you thought about me that way, Dean. You know I can’t return those feelings—”

“I swear to God, Charlie.”

She managed to giggle as she closed the door, padded across the floor, and climbed onto the mattress from the foot of the bed, but her mood shifted back into moroseness after she cuddled up to Dean’s back, hands clinging to his shoulders, face pressed between his shoulder blades. He reached up, patting one of her hands before squeezing it; she thanked him by pressing herself a little closer.

“I think it’s ’cause of my heat.”

“Huh?”

“This happened last month too,” Charlie mumbled into his back.

“You should be trying to sleep.”

“It was really vivid both times. More than usual.”

“Shh.”

“But—”

“Charlie. Shush.” He turned his head, catching more of a glimpse of her hair than her face, but he could nonetheless tell that her eyes were bright with moisture. “You can talk about it at a decent hour but right now, talking’s only gonna get you worked up. Sleep it off, and you can deal with it
in the morning.”

Charlie bit her lip, burrowing her face into his spine.

Sam caught Dean’s eye just before he laid his head back down, and he clung to Jess a little tighter.

Dean didn’t sleep any more that night.

“Do not be frightened.”

Easy for him to say. He was a tall, imposing, gruff-voiced man with a piercing ice-blue stare and the musk of an Alpha emanating off him; Kevin was a skinny kid of 13 with a gag tied around his face and a scent that marked him as an adolescent Omega. Of course Kevin was frightened, and the stench of urine soaking his blue jeans made that fact obvious.

“I will not hurt you. But you must stay quiet and do as I say for little while.”

Kevin nodded. What else was there to do? The stranger smiled at him—awkwardly, but genuinely—and motioned for Kevin to turn slightly. This enabled him to crouch behind the boy and begin working at the square knot that kept him tethered to a pipe in the old barn that he’d been dragged into a few days ago. Kevin heard a low growl of frustration and then the *shink* of a sharp edge rubbing lighting against fabric; the rope instantly fell apart a few seconds later.

As soon as his hands were free, Kevin clawed at his gag, contorting his face to pull it off over his head. He barely had time to pant out the adrenaline rush of freeing his mouth before the man took him by the arm and pulled him to his feet.

“Stay still for a moment.”

The man slipped the knife he had cut Kevin loose with into the pocket of his trenchcoat, extricating an aerosol can in its place. Kevin watched him with apprehensive eyes as he raised the can above Kevin’s head, showering him with its contents, and then did the same with himself. Kevin realized, watching the stranger circle the room with the can and suddenly realizing that he could no longer smell him, that he was spraying a scent suppressor.

“In my wolf form, I’m large enough to carry you on my back,” the man said, coming to face Kevin again. “I want you to hang onto this.” He held out the can; Kevin took it from him, staring at it dazedly. “Spray it behind us as we’re leaving. We can’t be too cautious. You understand?”

“Yeah,” Kevin breathed out, nodding with jerky motions. “I—yeah, I understand.”

“Good. I’ll leave first.”

When Kevin looked up, the man had already transformed. He was right; as a wolf he was gigantic and powerfully built, twice the size of a normal wolf, with a dark enough coat to melt into nighttime and deep foliage. This was why Alphas were scary: Kevin’s own wolf form, the size of a semi-large dog, seemed like a fetus in comparison.

Kevin watched, dumbfounded, as the wolf crossed the room, flexing his spine to slink under the hole that he had dug to get into the barn in the first place.
This wasn’t real. He was not really getting rescued by Mister Top Dog here.

The wolf outside pawed impatiently at the ground. It seemed to take Kevin a long time to finally crawl his way outside. The escape was graceless for a gangly human form, and Kevin emerged with dirt stuck to his clothes and back and at the corners of his very raw mouth, but he at least had the savvy to immediately cover the hole with the scent suppressor, one long spray followed by a few extra spritzes for good measure.

The wolf crouched low; Kevin fumbled his way onto his back like one might get on a horse for the first time. The wolf’s fur was a strange mix of bristly and soft, and Kevin found himself clinging tightly to it, to the tentative promise of safety that the man was offering him. In one hand he clutched the aerosol can, and after angling it so that it faced backwards, he spritzed it once, as a starting signal.

The wolf took off.

“My, look at all the bloodshot eyes at the table this morning,” Ellen commented mildly at breakfast.

Indeed Dean, Sam, and Charlie all bore the signs of interrupted sleep: Charlie was staring wide-eyed at her plate, Sam had his elbow propped on the table and his face buried in his hand (he had just dozed off when Jess woke him up again to say good-bye as she headed back to her own house, and the sudden coldness that her absence left in his bed made him too chilled to catch whatever sleep was left to him), and Dean was more interested in playing with his cup than drinking his coffee.

“You didn’t go for your run this morning, Sam,” she continued, sliding bacon from a pan onto his plate.

“Jess probably kept him up all night,” Jo giggle-muttered into her forkful of sausage.

“That true?” Sam’s glare, aimed at Jo, gave Ellen all the confirmation she needed, and she tapped the spatula against the pan to get off the excess grease before rapping it against Sam’s head.

“Ow!”

“That’s for having Jess sleep over without my say-so.” She took two steps around the table, to where Dean sat beside Jo, and struck the back of his skull, as well.

“Hey! The hell was that for?”

“Letting him.”

Jo, who had begun preening smugly for putting one over on her foster brothers, recoiled instantly when the spatula fell upon her own blonde head.

“And that’s for being a tattletale.” Ellen returned to the stove, setting the empty pan on the range. “Now if Jess was the reason you two boys didn’t sleep, then Charlie would look better’n she does, so I know it wasn’t her. So what gives, guys?”
“I had a dream,” Charlie said plainly, still looking blankly at her plate. “So I went to Sam and Dean’s room.”

“Aw shoot, Charlie.” Ellen immediately went to her foster daughter, wrapping her arms around Charlie’s shoulders and laying her cheek on Charlie’s hair. “You wanna tell me about it?”

“If this is gonna be a moment better served by a shrink’s couch, then I’m gonna eat outside,” Dean said, pushing his chair back and grabbing his plate and cup. Ellen glared at him for his bluntness, but didn’t rebuke him.

“I’ll head out too,” Sam said, rising with much more grace as Dean walked out the door. “You coming, Jo?”

“No, I’m gonna stay here,” Jo said, picking herself up to take another seat closer to Charlie. Sam nodded with a wan look on his face--it was understandable that Jo would want to be there to support Charlie, considering her own past--and left the room, stopping Ash and Bobby before they also wandered into the kitchen looking for food.

Sam decided to take his meal out onto the front porch and join Dean on the porch swing, where they had a perfect view of the back of the Roadhouse, Ellen’s restaurant. Dean was tearing into his breakfast with a vigor that surpassed his usual morning hunger. Sam sat down next to him, silently watching Dean wolf down his sausage, spluttering a bit as he tried to swallow before he was done chewing. After several minutes of harsh eating he roughly set the dishes on the porch floor, making the silverware rattle against the plate, and began gulping down his coffee.

“Dean—”

His brother responded by throwing his unfinished cup onto the front lawn; luckily it was a plastic travel mug and did not break upon impact with the frozen November ground.

“We saved her, Dean,” Sam said calmly, soothingly. “They can’t hurt her anymore.”

“Like fuck. They can when she can’t even get some God damn sleep.” Dean turned his head to glare at Sam, but had to soften his features when he ascertained that Sam had spoken to reassure himself as much as Dean. He ran his hand harshly up his face, trying to rub some wakefulness and a better mood into his brain by doing so. “Look, Sammy, I know we did good by Charlie. But that don’t mean it doesn’t make me mad as hell still.”

“You have the right to be,” Sam said evenly. “I’m still angry, too. I’m angry all the time for what happened to her, and to Jo, and to Jess. Hell, for what people’ve tried to do to you. But, for their sake, and yours, I try to resist the urge to act like a big douche when I’m pissed off about it.”

Dean snorted, simultaneously a dismissal of Sam’s admonishment, and an apology for behaving immaturely. Sam didn’t reply, but leaned back against the swing, sipping his drink and watching the wind shake the bare trees.

“I hate being so fucking useless, Sammy,” Dean said, after a long spell of silence.

Sam swallowed the last of his drink before throwing his own cup out onto the lawn. Unlike Dean’s, it was glass, and it shattered when it ran aground.

“Me too.”
Safe House

Chapter Notes

This chapter was edited to remove the first half and merge with the third chapter due to changes in the writing style that I'm angling for. I apologize for any confusion!

“It’s their last night as unmated wolves, and they’re spending it in each other’s laps.” Ash complained good-naturedly, popping the cap off a bottle of beer and sliding it a few inches down the bar, to where Dean was waiting to catch it.

“I know, it’s gross, isn’t it?” Dean replied. Mildly chagrined (and insanely jealous) as their casual intimacy made him, there was something disgustingly heartwarming about the way Jess sat perpendicular to Sam in the booth, her legs slung over his lap; about the way Sam, even when engrossed in conversation with someone else, absently-yet-determinedly ran his palm around her knee cap, down her calf, about her ankle, finally cupping her foot to gently massage her toes.

It was especially touching considering how Jess, after the fire, never took off her shoes where other people could see her feet—one foot had made it out okay; the other looked as though she had left it sitting on the range. If the old adage that Alphas led, Betas helped, and Omegas served was to be given credence, Jess submitted totally to Sam’s need to succor her. How friggin’ perfect they were for each other made Dean want to adopt a kitten and punch one at the same time.

“Most disgusting thing I ever saw,” a voice said from behind him, and Dean whirled around, the momentarily startled expression on his face melting into a grin.

“Benny! Dude, didn’t know you were showing up tonight.” Dean stuck out his hand; Benny took it and pulled them into a one-armed hug. Sam hadn’t initially liked Benny…rather, he’d been suspicious of Benny, but had warmed up to him once it became clear that he wasn’t a threat to Dean.

“Thought I’d drop by to wish the happy couple my best, and see if the best man wanted some company.”

“Benny! Dude, didn’t know you were showing up tonight.” Dean stuck out his hand; Benny took it and pulled them into a one-armed hug. Sam hadn’t initially liked Benny…rather, he’d been suspicious of Benny, but had warmed up to him once it became clear that he wasn’t a threat to Dean.

And here I thought you met her during an orgy or something.”

“Our former relationship is not indicative of all my social engagements.”

Dean laughed, but cut himself off too prematurely to smoothly transition into his question. “Speaking of our first meeting…”

“They’re not showing tonight.”
"...Oh." Dean tried not to let his disappointment show too obviously

"Ben's sick, didn't she tell you?"

"No." Dean's eyes narrowed, replacing the crestfallen look. "What kind of "sick"?"

"Nothing huge. He just came down with something this morning. Lisa said on the phone that she
thinks it'll clear up by the wedding tomorrow, but she wants him to rest tonight."

"Oh. Well, that's good." Dean smiled, a little weakly. "S'long as it's not, you know, big."

"Just a bug. I'm surprised she didn't mention it to you."

"Well. You're the kid's dad, not me. So. Whatever." Dean raised his bottle, pressed it to his lips, and tilted his head back.

He nearly sprayed all over Benny as the door to the Roadhouse swung open and a wolf, with a
child clinging to its back, stumbled inside.

From her position in the back of the restaurant Ellen shot forward first. She was the Alpha, and the
Roadhouse was her territory, after all. Bobby and Jo were next, as her mate and "official" heir, and then Jody Mills, as a police officer. But it was Dean who made it to the door first, by simple virtue
of being seated closest to it, and he snatched the child up, stepping them both back as Ellen,
already taking wolf form, lunged forward, grabbed the stranger by the neck with her teeth, and
pinned him to the floor. The stranger whimpered, doing his best to tuck his tail between his legs--
one of which was held at an odd angle--and turn onto his back, to show his belly, without breaking
his neck under the pressure of her jaws.

"He’s good!" the boy beside Dean yelped, trying to go forward but stayed by Dean’s grip on his
arm. “He helped me escape, he’s a good guy…”

“Escape what?” Jo demanded, poised to take her own wolf form; the rest of the party was crowding
around behind her, confused and fearful murmurs rippling through them.

“I don’t know, they kidnapped me, I don’t know who took me!” Kevin said, his voice raising in
pitch. “But he’s the one who busted me out! He’s not dangerous! I promise!”

“Ellen, let him transform,” Jody said, in her lowest, calmest, I-mean-business voice. “He can’t
speak to us as a wolf.”

Ellen glared down at the stranger who had dared to trespass onto her property and enter the
Roadhouse without permission. He had ceased struggling altogether and now lay still, except for
the rise and fall of his chest; high-pitched, placating whines escaped his throat as he tried to even
out his breathing.

“He’s outnumbered if he tries anything, Ellen.”

Ellen hesitated, then pinched the stranger’s neck with her mouth as a warning, and let him go.

Instantly the wolf transformed into a human, a black-haired man who turned his piercing blue eyes
to Kevin, to check on him, the beauty and intensity of which took Dean aback when their gazes
accidentally met.

“I apologize for barging in like this,” the man said, taking his eyes away from Kevin and Dean to
look around at the entire party. “I was hurt." He gestured down to one of his legs; his ankle lay on
the floor at an awkward angle. "I smelled a large number of Betas and Omegas here, so I figured it was safe."

“Well that depends,” Bobby said, stepping forward to hold out his hand, to help Ellen up; she had transformed back into a human as the stranger spoke. “Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Castiel Shurley.”

“Aw, shit,” Ellen said, straightening herself out as soon as she was on her feet. “Great. If I die and it looks like a mob hit, we’ll know who killed me.”

“I assure you, I will not be informing my family that my neck was almost snapped in half tonight.”

“Castiel Shurley, my name is Officer Jody Mills,” Jody stepped in matter-of-factly; her badge was in her hand and flashed within seconds. “And you are?” she continued, looking at the boy Castiel had carried in.

“I’m Kevin Tran. I’m in Advanced Placement,” he added, feeling the inane urge to babble.

“And you say you were kidnapped?” Kevin nodded. “But Mr. Shurley helped you escape?”

“Yeah.”

"And where are you from?"


Jody drew out the walkie-talkie that she always carried on her--“Three things I always am: a wife, a mother, and a cop”--and clicked it on, setting it to the correct frequency before raising it to her mouth. “Kathleen, this is Jody, I need a confirmation on a name.”

There was a pause, and then radio static, before Jody’s coworker spoke. "What can I do for you, Jody?"

"Was there a “Kevin Tran” reported missing? Adolescent…” she sniffed the air, “Omega male, 12 or 13 years old, East Asian descent, comes from Michigan.”

"Lemme see..." Dimly they heard the sound of papers rustling and a keyboard being used, before Kathleen spoke again. “That’s an affirmative, Jody. A boy matching your description was reported missing by his mother six months ago. Why?”

“’Cause he just walked into the Roadhouse. I’m going back on duty for the next few hours or so. Punch me in if you please, because I’d like to get paid for this.”

“Sure. I’ll be right over to help.”

"Bring an ambulance. There’re no visible injuries, but we should get him checked out."

"Got it."

“Thanks.” Jody turned off her device, turning her attention back to Kevin. “D’you know your mom’s phone number offhand, kiddo?”

Kevin immediately rattled off ten digits.

“Good, ’cause we need to give her a call and let her know you’ve been found.”
“You can use the phone in the kitchen, Jody,” Ellen said.

“Thanks, Ellen. Mr. Shurley, I’m gonna ask you to stay here in the restaurant; I’m gonna need your statement when I’m done.”

Castiel nodded in a way that suggested that he’d heard those words before, and Jody held out her arm towards Kevin, finally replacing her businesslike expression with a maternal smile. Kevin hesitated, but after a moment convinced his feet to walk to her. As Kevin left Dean’s side, Dean stepped forward, offering his hand to Castiel.

“Here, you can get off the floor now.”

Castiel took Dean’s arm—his grip was strong, Dean noted—and hauled himself to his feet. He stumbled a little when he forgot his injury; Dean braced himself to carry Castiel's weight, but found himself aided by Sam, who went forward to help support Castiel on his other side. The crowd of partygoers backed up, allowing Jody to lead Kevin into the kitchen, and Dean and Sam to assist Castiel onto a barstool.

“Thank you,” Castiel said in Dean's direction, once he was settled, and he looked out again, taking in the decorations that covered the room. “It appears I interrupted a celebration.”

“Yeah. My brother Sam,” Dean pointed to Sam, who had stepped back, but stayed within hearing distance, “and his fiancée Jess,” she was now at Sam’s side, just slightly behind him, “they’re getting married tomorrow.”

“Congratulations,” Castiel said, in the betrothed couple’s direction.

“Thank you,” they replied, in tandem, a little dazedly.

“So…yeah, you apparently rescued a kid, awesome, have a beer,” Sam continued, after a beat of silence.

“On the house,” Ash added; he had taken his place behind the bar once more, and now he set a bottle down next to Castiel’s arm. “You deserve one, dude. Looks like you need one, too.”

“So what the hell happened?” Jo asked, hopping up onto the barstool on one side of Castiel; Dean quickly took the one on the other side before someone else could.

“Am I being interrogated?” Castiel asked.

“Not yet, the cop’s gone,” Ellen said, coming to stand next to where her daughter sat. “We’re just interested to know what circumstances caused you to barge into my establishment with a kid on your back tonight.”

"I was not planning to come here. Like I said, I was injured." Castiel picked up the beer Ash had offered him, but instead of opening it, played with it, passing it back and forth between his hands nervously.

"Well, who were you taking the kid from?"

“I would rather not say. I’ve already involved you more than I should--”

“Was it the Romans?” Charlie asked, in a small but loud voice, from behind Sam and Jess.

Castiel turned a surprised face in her direction. “You know them?”
“I know the Romans,” Charlie said, not realizing that she had folded her arms protectively over her stomach and had started to hunch, adopting the same stance as when she had padded into Sam and Dean’s room early that morning.

“We're already acquainted with that particular pack of bastards,” Bobby said, nearly spitting.

“I see.” Castiel cast his gaze downwards. “I’m sorry.” It was hard to tell if he were merely sympathetic, or genuinely apologetic. “And yes, I'm pretty sure it was them.”

“How’d you find out where that kid was?” Sam asked; Jess had gone to collect Charlie and bring her close to them.

“Accidentally. I noticed him with an adult that obviously was not related to him, so I tracked him.”

“And that's what you do?” Dean asked. “Go around rescuing kids?”

“I try to.”

The kitchen door opened, catching everyone’s attention, and Jody stepped back into the restaurant.

“We got hold of his mom,” Jody informed the group. “Kid’s still talking to her.” She gestured with her head towards the kitchen. “Poor woman’s been searching for him on the west coast. She can't get a flight this close to the holiday, so she'll be driving in; she thinks she'll get here on Thanksgiving."

“What are you doing with him until then?” Ellen asked, turning so she could fully face Jody.

“Well, we could bring him down to the station but there’s only prison cots there, and I don’t think that’s exactly best for him. Is there any way--"

“We have room at the house,” Ellen said, with a wave of her hand.

“How about for Mr. Shurley over here?” Jody gestured towards Castiel. “It’s gonna be pretty late by the time we’re done.”

"He can stay with us too."

“I won’t impose any more than I already have.” Castiel put the beer down, as if to emphasize. “There must be a hotel in the city. If not, I can sleep outs--"

“Don't go getting any stupid ideas,” Ellen said, reaching over and grabbing his shoulder to prevent him from moving. “Consider it my apology for nearly breaking your neck.”

“Thank you, but that might not be a good idea."""

"Were you being followed?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Then you're staying."

"But--"

"I’m the Alpha of this territory. You’re in my territory, so that means you do as I say.”

Jody braced herself. If Castiel fought Ellen on this, Jody was pretty sure she could break it up
without involving any other Alphas, but it’d be messy. Luckily, Castiel gave no visible emotional reaction to Ellen’s words, aside from the frustrated look in his eyes.

"Not like you can go anywhere with your foot like that, anyway," Dean said, to break the uncomfortable silence that followed. "What happened there?"

"Carelessness," Castiel grumbled. "Ran too fast, landed wrong." Castiel grimaced as his foot twitched, involuntarily, sending a jolt of pain up his calf. "I probably sprained it."

"The ambulance is coming for Kevin, we’ll make sure you get looked at, too," Jody said. "In the meantime I’ve got some questions for you."

"I noticed him first in Lebanon. He was with someone he obviously wasn’t related to, and seemed very distressed, so I grew suspicious and followed them at a distance."

"Sounds like this ain't your first search and rescue," Jody said with a small laugh, reaching for the notepad she kept, along with her walkie-talkie and badge, on her person at all times.

"It's not. Anyway, there are old farming communities around Lebanon that are no longer in use, and a lot of the buildings have been abandoned. From my vantage point I saw them put Kevin in one of the barns. I laid low for a few days, in case they were suspicious of being followed, before I sneaked inside to rescue him."

"And when was this?"

"Late last night or early this morning, when it was still dark."

"Were you able to get a scent on any of them?"

Castiel shook his head. "They used scent suppressors."

"How about a clear visual?"

"Unfortunately if I got too close, they'd be able to see or smell me, and I didn't want to risk it. I had only enough scent suppressor on me to cover our tracks once I freed him, so I didn't want to need to use it by getting too close."

That made Jody pause her note-taking and look up, bemused. "You do realize all forms of scent modifiers are illegal, right?"

"Don't police officers break the speed limit when they chase traffic offenders?"

"Touche. I can knock it down to a small fine if you give up the can."

"Kevin threw it out after we used it up."

"You know where?"

"Somewhere in Concordia."

"Great. All right, maybe I won't mention it." Jody scribbled something on her notepad out. "Now, you said that you weren't being followed?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you leave tracks?"
"Probably for part of the way, but we went into a few towns. You can't leave tracks on concrete."

"Do you think they know he's gone?"

"Perhaps. They left him alone in that barn for two days before I rescued him. They seemed to be punishing him for something." Charlie, Jess's arm slung about her shoulder, flinched, and Castiel, who saw it from the corner of his eye, frowned down at his hands. "I don't know if they were going to continue to isolate him, or if someone has since been sent to check on him."

"Any idea what they might have been punishing him for?"

"I haven't asked Kevin. I haven't asked him anything about his time with them yet."

Jody grimaced. She wasn't looking forward to having to ask, either. "Where were you planning on taking him?"

"Gardner. One of my brothers, Joshua, has a church there, Redemption Lutheran. He's licensed to shelter orphans and foundlings until they are adopted."

"You Shurleys are quite the philanthropists."

"Only some of us."

Castiel said the words as if sucking on lemons. Before anyone could comment on it, the air outside the Roadhouse filled with short bursts of police and ambulance sirens, and the red, blue, white, and yellow lights of both flashed in the windows.

"Sis, you gotta get some of those for here," Ash said. "Get 'em for Karaoke Night. It'll be awesome."

Ellen reached around behind Jo to smack her little brother on the back of his head.
Thank you all so much for the kudos, bookmarks, and feedback :)

Heat is like EXTREME OVULATION with some PMS thrown in.

I work at a hospital doing what Pamela does. Since I'm not involved directly in patient care, I'm not entirely solid on what hospital procedure is for sexual assault complaints, but I have done my best based on what I've picked up on through osmosis.

"So great party, guys."

Jess had to laugh. After Kathleen and the ambulance arrived, Kevin and Castiel had been whisked away to the hospital. Jody followed, as did Bobby and Ellen, who figured since they were now playing host to the newcomers that it was fitting for them to tag along. After that, the guests could talk of nothing but the night's events, and rather than make a futile attempt at recapturing everyone's interest, Sam and Jess had decided to take over a booth, more secluded and facing away from the bar. Charlie, who had made the quip, elected to go with them.

"Hey, at least it happened tonight, and not tomorrow," Sam said, resting a hand on Jess's head.

"Yeah, seriously." Jess said, snuggling into her fiance's side.

Charlie watched with a small smile. She and Sam were both Betas, and she thought them rather quintessential for their type, but Sam had a weird way of acting like an Alpha where Jess was concerned. Not that it was particularly surprising. "Yeah, child trafficking is kind of a downer."

Jess frowned, reaching out a hand--the one covered in burn marks--to cover Charlie's. "Are you all right?"

"I'm...as ever," Charlie said, with a weak smile.

"I saw you in the boys' bedroom this morning," Jess pressed.

"She had a nightmare," Sam said quietly.

"Okay, so I'm not "as ever", but I already talked about it with Aunt Ellen and Jo this morning."

Jess frowned, squeezing Charlie's hand a little tighter, and Charlie hated the fact that she was taking comfort in the gesture. The high-pitched stammering, the wide, terrified eyes, the inelegant gait of a half-starved child...that had been her two years ago, except Kevin had someone to call and she hadn't, and wow she was not going to be jealous of the kid.

"I'm just a little emotional, is all," Charlie continued, pulling her hand away. "You know. Time of the month."

"I do know," Jess said, leaning back against Sam once she no longer had Charlie's hand to hold.
"And I don't know, but you have my sympathy," Sam said; Jess leaned her head back to make a silly face at him.

Monthly heat was a uniquely feminine experience. It wasn't as though women felt no arousal at other points during the month, but the possibility of pregnancy made the body's hormones go nuts. If the craving for sex was not fulfilled--sometimes even if it was--heat could leave a woman wrung out emotionally, especially young women who had just started the experience, like Charlie. It was little wonder that heat could give Charlie nightmares strong enough to make her go running to her brothers' room for platonic comfort. She didn't yet have a lover that could provide a romantic version.

Jess found her own nightmares intensifying at this time of the month. She refused to have sex with Sam while Dean was in the room--she had avoided having sex with Sam at all--but for the past few months she had only been able to sleep peacefully during heat if Sam was by her side, and sometimes that was no insurance.

"Oh, I see, so I'm not invited to your little club meeting?" Jo stood by the table, her hands on her hips.

"Sorry, cool kids only," Sam said.

"Then what are you doing here?" Jo slid onto the bench beside Charlie. "Hey waiter!" she called to Dean, who was now reunited with Benny at the bar. "You gonna take our order or what?" Dean responded with a raised middle finger, and Jo flipped her hair with faux indignity. "The service here sucks. I should complain to the owner."

"She's not here right now," Charlie laughed. "But you can talk to her daughter."

Jo folded her arms on the table, leaning in conspiratorially. "So. Mom and Dad have a fifth child."

"Nah, kid has a mom," Sam said. "But five'll get you ten that they end up staying with us for awhile."

"I'm not betting against a sure thing," Jo said with a laugh. "It's a good thing you guys ordered enough food to feed a third world country for the next year."

"That food'll be gone by Thanksgiving and you know it."

"Yeah, Dean'll make sure of that." Dean heard nothing but his name, but to be safe he raised both middle fingers in Jo's direction, and Benny threw in for good measure. Jo stuck out her tongue. "Speaking of Dean," she said, lowering her voice, "did anyone else notice him making eyes with Tall-Dark-and-Jesus?"

"I think we were all kind of distracted by the fact that a huge wolf basically kicked in the door, Jo."

"I didn't exactly miss that either, Snarky Snarkerson, but there was some definitely eye-foreplay going on."

"Jo..."

"What? All I'm saying is that if Lisa's a no-show tomorrow, Dean's got a viable date for the wedding."

"At least someone does," Charlie muttered under her breath.
"Yeah, sorry about that, sister dear," Jo said, resting her arm around Charlie's shoulders. She turned her head as if to whisper some joke or confidence in Charlie's ear, but what she actually said was "You okay?"

"Yes," Charlie said, not bothering to be discreet. "Look, guys, I'm flattered that you're so concerned about me. And I know I must've freaked you out this morning because, well, this morning was really bad. And yeah, it does upset me that the Romans might be involved. But hand to God, I've got my shit together right now. Honest."

"Okay, okay," Jo said, putting up her hands. "We got it. We just...want you to know that if you're ever feeling the least bit crappy, you can come to us."

"I know. And you guys can come to me, too. But it's the night before the wedding, and two nights before Thanksgiving, and I just want to stay a little upbeat, you know?" She flashed them a wide but hesitant grin.

"No objections here," Jess cut in before Sam or Jo could respond. They didn't mean to do it, but as a group of Betas it was all too easy to shut her, the sole Omega, out of the conversation. "In fact, I propose that Mr. Harvelle here fetches us some liquid cheer and we get ecstatic."

She prodded Sam with her elbow, so unexpectedly and strongly that she nearly pushed him out of the booth.

"All right, all right," Sam said with a laugh, righting himself. "Anything for my girls," he continued, smiling warmly at his sisters and fiancee before turning his head to face the bar, focusing his gaze, and narrowing his eyes.

Dean jerked back, nearly unseating himself from the barstool, to avoid getting smacked in the face as four bottles of beer suddenly whizzed past his head.

"Dude, could you fucking be more careful please?" Dean snarled. "You almost got my eye that time!"

"That's what she said!" Jo called back with a shit-eating grin, snatching her bottle out of the air; the other three floated a little more gracefully into the hands of their respective owners.

"Cheers," Charlie said, lifting her bottle high in the middle of the table; the air filled with the sound of clinking glass, and then the silence of those attempting to get at least a little tipsy.

"All right ma'am, thank you. We're gonna take good care of your son. I'm gonna hand you to the registrar now, okay? She's got a few more questions for you."

Registered Nurse Missouri Moseley handed Bobby's cell phone to Pamela Barnes, who began grilling Mrs. Tran on Kevin's personal information. Immediately after obtaining consent Missouri had started drawing blood, and it didn't take very long after she passed the phone to Pamela for her handful of tubes to be filled, thank God. Last thing she wanted to do to this poor kid was root around in his arm with a needle trying to find a vein.

When she saw Bobby and Ellen walk into Room 16 behind the rig she'd had a sinking feeling. The first time she saw them come to the Damian Cosmas Medical Center Emergency Department, Jo had been unconscious and half-eviscerated; the last time, they had followed the ambulance that brought Jess, screaming to high heaven and thoroughly cooked on one side. This kid didn't have any obvious wounds beyond heavy bruising, which gave her a false sense of security; her heart
broke when the EMT pulled her aside to inform her that Kevin was here for "possible sexual assault; no food in three days; general weakness".

He was taking it like a champion, though. In nursing school Missouri had had it drilled into her that she ought to be extra careful with Omegas; they were more delicate, bruised more easily, were more prone to hystericus. If twenty years of actual nursing didn't prove to Missouri that this line of thinking was a crock of shit, then treating Dean Harvelle for years certainly did, and now so did Kevin Tran. He hadn't made a peep when she stuck him with the needle, nor had the film of moisture in his eyes spilled over even when he heard his mother's shaking voice on the phone inform Missouri that he didn't have any allergies and was she absolutely sure that Kevin was okay?

"All right, sugar, Officer Mills is going to stay with you while I send these down to the lab," Missouri said. "Dr. Richardson's going to be here in a few minutes to check you out, okay?"

"'Kay," Kevin said, tightly.

Missouri taped the plastic syringe to Kevin's arm and made sure to smile at him extra warmly before stepping out of the room. Pamela followed her, having hung up with Mrs. Tran, and shut the door behind her. Room 16 was one of the few rooms in the ER to actually have a door instead of merely a curtain; the heightened sense of privacy made it the usual destination for problem pregnancies, vaginal and rectal bleeds, and especially debilitating heats.

Bobby and Ellen had hunted down chairs and situated themselves as close to the wall, as far out of the way of foot traffic, as they possibly could. This, incidentally, put them extremely close to Missouri's work station, where the nurse took Kevin's tubes of blood to begin labeling them.

"So you two are still quite the homing signal," Missouri said casually.

"Like bugs to a zapper," Bobby grumbled, as Pamela handed his phone back to him.

"Well, take it as a compliment, honey. The universe knows you're good parents, so it throws the kids right to you."

She didn't see Bobby swell with pride--no one did--but she could tell he was doing it all the same. The less-than-stellar example Bobby's Alpha father had set for him had left the man terrified that he would instinctively punch Jo in the face for every instance of backtalk (Jo had in fact been an accident; no way, at that time, had Bobby been planning to breed Ellen). Eighteen years of parenthood and the adoration of his four children hadn't yet convinced the man that he was a natural at it, and Missouri saw no harm in nourishing his ego in this regard when she got the chance.

She stopped on the way to the tubing system that carried papers, samples, and equipment throughout the hospital to co-sign Pamela's consent forms; when she returned she saw that Pamela had stayed in the area instead of returning to her own work station.

"So speaking of children," Missouri said, taking a seat at her desk, "how are the kids?"

"Grumpy nervous yet?" Pamela added. She had nicknamed Sam "Grumpy" when they first met, right after he and Dean had been officially adopted by the Harvelles; he had been unusually surly and uncooperative about the court-mandated ER evaluation his new parents had brought him there for.

"Nope. Not for one hot second." Not since Sam had summoned them to Jess's hospital room after one of her reconstructive surgeries; not since he, white-faced and trembling with rage, had asked
for Bobby and Ellen's permission to take a mate while still living in their territory, at least for a little while until they graduated and had some money behind them; had Sam seemed the least bit hesitant.

"Good. That's real promising," Missouri said, grinning. "And how about the rest of them? Everyone doing okay?"

"They're fine," Ellen said, but her voice was a little too airy, her gaze a little too focused on something far away.

"You get them to go see a therapist yet?" Pamela asked.

"They won't go," Ellen snapped, suddenly defensive. "And I'm not going to make them."

"Well you gotta do something to convince them then, Ellen," Missouri said. "It's not healthy for them to keep doing what they're doing."

"Believe me, we're aware," Bobby said in a low voice. "Every month one or the other of the girls is having nightmares."

"Charlie had one just last night; she actually slept in the boys' room because she was too shook up to sleep alone," Ellen said. "And the boys, hell. They've lived with us, what, eight years? And not a peep from them about anything before that, unless they're being sarcastic little shits. If they're not speaking to us, what makes you think they'll speak to a hired stranger?"

"I'm not blaming you two," Missouri said, well-honed diplomacy coloring her words. "Can't a lady just express some frustration?"

"So long as you don't think you're the only one frustrated," Bobby muttered.

"I know I am not." Ellen seemed the most receptive to a comforting hand on her shoulder, and it was there that Missouri placed one. "And I know that I am not a therapist, but if they or you ever feel like talking, I am here."

"Thanks, Missouri."

"And I would probably make things worse, but I'm sure I could direct you somewhere," Pamela said, with a laugh; the other three weakly chuckled along with her.

The four exchanged see-you-tomorrows; Pamela was off to her own desk, and Missouri to another patient. With them gone, Ellen's tenseness finally gave up and she slumped, resting her head on Bobby's shoulder. After a second, he rested his own atop hers.

"You think I should make 'em go talk to someone?" Ellen asked softly, when a handful of moments passed. With Charlie's 17th birthday this past April, all of her children were now legal adults. They still lived in Ellen's territory, however, and as the head of the pack she had every right to make medical decisions for those in her charge. "I'm just...I'm sick of seeing them walk around the house with those eyes. Those damn thousand-yard stares they get sometimes, like they're looking into their own souls."

Bobby wrapped his arm around his wife's lower back, his hand gently clamping around her waist. "I think the last thing they need is an Alpha forcin' them to do something they don't want to do, hon."

Ellen snorted; a self-deprecating, exasperated, angry noise.
"So Kevin," Jody said, sitting at the foot of his stretcher. Dr. Amelia Richardson had come in to assess him, checking every scar for infection, every bruise for hemorrhaging, his eyes and breath for intoxicants, his chest and limbs for broken bones. She breezed out the door again, saying that she going to get a kit, and that they had to wait for all the lab results before he could eat. "I hate to do this now, kiddo, but the sooner I get your statement, the sooner we can hopefully put these people away."

"I don't know who took me for sure," Kevin said. "They never said their last names."

"Did you get first names?"

"Edgar and Susan. But, I mean, I don't know if those are their real names."

"Those'll help, just the same. Can you describe what they looked like?"

Susan was an Asian woman with a rectangular face and long hair; Edgar a Hispanic man with no particular distinguishing features. Jody frowned, as those descriptions certainly didn't match anyone in the Roman family, but she notated to look into it just the same. "Do you remember what they smelled like?"

"Nothing. They always wore scent suppressors around me."

Damnit. "Okay. Now, I want you to tell me what happened to you, from when they first kidnapped you until you got to the Roadhouse tonight."

"I was...um..." An embarrassed look--the kind Jody knew well, the one that asked "How could I be so stupid to fall for something I had no reason to believe was a trap?"--crossed Kevin's face. "So...so I'm in some AP courses at my school, right?"

"Which school?"

"Lincoln High School. It's in Neighbor. Anyway, um, I was staying after at the library to do some research and all of a sudden, this little girl walks up to me. And she says to me that her mom's the new school nurse, and she--the kid, not her mom--got lost trying to find her office. So I tell her that I'll walk her over. So we go into the nurse's office, and next thing I know, there's a bag over my head and they're dragging me out the emergency exit."

Jody pressed through the shake in Kevin's voice. "Where did they take you?"

"I don't know. All over? I was in a lot of nondescript rooms. They took me outdoors sometimes, I guess if they thought someone was onto them, but I never had a good grasp on where I was. The last place I was in before Lebanon was somewhere in California, I think."

"Were you with "Edgar" and "Susan" the entire time?"

"Yeah. I overheard them talk about bringing me to the boss a few times, but they never did."

"What do you know about the "boss"?"

"Pretty much nothing. They would just say that the boss might want to see me, but nothing else, really."

"How about the little girl?"
"Um...I think her name was Annie? That's what she told me. But that might be a fake name, too."

"Do you believe she was another abduction victim?"

Kevin snorted. "Probably not. She was sure comfortable around the other two."

That didn't strictly mean anything, but Jody noted it. "Did you meet anybody else? Any other kids? Anyone who worked with Susan and Edgar?"

Kevin shook his head. "They wanted to keep me separate. They never...they never sold me to anyone. Never rented me out, even. They kept leaving me alone places...I think they wanted...wanted to break me down, or something, I don't know," he finished in a mumble.

Jody remembered Castiel mentioning that he thought Kevin was being punished for something. "You resisted them, I take it."

"Hell yeah. I'm nobody's bitch," Kevin spat, and Jody tried to reconcile the panicked, breathless little boy with the bright-eyed, scowling teenager. Suddenly the bruises not hidden by the hospital gown, the ones peppering his neck and arms, were extremely noticeable, and Jody's stomach twisted. Whichever was Kevin's real personality, if either, one was what the encounter had left him as, and the other was how he had gotten through it. How he was getting through talking about it now. A shiver of horror passed through her as, unbidden, the thought of her own little boy, her Owen, who had just turned 10 and therefore just began giving off his Omega scent, in Kevin's position ran through her brain. She shifted uncomfortably, lifting up and resettling on the bed like a fussy mother hen over her eggs.

"Do you know why...did they ever give you a clue as to why they took you, in particular?"

Kidnapping obviously well-loved children out of their home environment was not a typical move of child traffickers. Rebellious but naive runaways, kids who had been thrown out of their home, itinerants, orphans...those were the usual targets.

Kevin responded with something Jody couldn't understand.

"I'm sorry?"

Kevin spoke again, and Jody tried listening harder, and though the words were different she was still unable to parse them. At her befuddled look, Kevin launched into a new explanation, and this time Jody thought she heard...Spanish?

"You speak another language?"

"Si, oui, hai, naam, ja, ken, ndiyo, haa'n, baleh, a-yo, hanji, hufi, ano, igen, da, evet, avunu, nai, tak, taip--"

"How many languages do you speak?"

"All of them."

"...I'm sorry?"

"I can speak, and read, any language you put in front of me."

"You're a xenogloss?"

Kevin nodded.
Statistically, xenoglossia popped up once per generation. The last xenogloss Jody had heard about was Chuck Shurley, the patriarch of the Shurley pack and presumably Castiel's father, and he had disappeared from the public eye long ago. Telekinesis was slightly more common; hell, Sam was telekinetic. And Missouri had something about her, too, some extraordinarily powerful sense of smell or something like that. No parents expected a child to be born with special abilities, but it wouldn't be a total shock if said child had something like Sam and Missouri. But a xenogloss...that was rare. Moreover, that was lucrative.

"You said they didn't try to...to sell you. So they wanted to keep you? For what?"

Kevin shrugged. "I don't know. They would put things in front of me to translate and I'd refuse to." He snorted. "That's how I got these." He held out his arms.

"But you could translate them, right?" Kevin nodded. "Do you remember what they said?"

"It was just random sentences. They were testing me, to see how good I was. And how cooperative, I guess."

That would explain the two-day isolation in a barn. If assaults weren't working, starvation might do the trick. And if the kid died, well, he wasn't making himself useful anyway.

The door opened, Dr. Amelia Richardson sweeping into the room, followed by Missouri with a cart, on which there were cottons swabs, small tubes, glass slides, and packaging for sensitive materials.

"What's that for?" Kevin blurted out.

Amelia's professionalism was obviously well-practiced and equally obviously under assault. "This is a..." she searched her internal lexicon for the right label "...Physical Evidence Recovery Kit, Kevin. So we can see if they left anything on you."

"Do you have to?"

Jody clamped her hand around Kevin's ankle.

"We can call your mother and have her refuse this particular treatment."

"No. Don't...don't call my mom again."

"Okay," Amelia said, her voice having gotten gentler and gentler until now it was almost a whisper.

"I'll go if you want me to, Kevin," Jody said, standing up. His eyes were focused on the cart, though, and if he heard her he didn't intimate that this was the case. She pressed her lips together and slid out the door, closing it behind her.

"Want some?" Pamela had managed to sneak Bobby and Ellen some coffee from the employee kitchen, and now Ellen raised her cup towards Jody.

"No thanks." Jody let Ellen take a sip. "How do you guys do it?"

Ellen swallowed, but didn't answer; it was Bobby who spoke. "I dunno."

Jody nodded. After a moment of thick silence she excused herself and ended up at Pamela's desk, asking to use the hospital phone. Pamela punched in a 9 for an outside line, and then let Jody dial
the house number.

"Mommy?"

For a long moment Jody couldn't speak, only let Owen's tiny, sleepy voice entrench itself firmly in her brain, alongside the thought that if she was personally responsible for the death of Susan or Edgar or whoever their boss was, she would be okay with that.
1) Having recently read that TPTB deliberately chose to fridge Jess in the show even though they were advised to make her a long-running character, I am very determined to make Jess a viewpoint character, because fuck unconscious systemic misogyny, that's why. She's a singer because I never got over my love of songfics.

2) In this universe, a person's scent is comprised of a mix of different "fragrances". Each child is born with an individual fragrance, and a fragrance that is shared with one's biological family. When they turn 10, they develop a fragrance that marks them as Alpha, Beta, or Omega. When they turn 17, which is the age that sexuality starts to develop, the A/B/O fragrance is slightly modified to reveal a person's sexual orientation, so in this world it's literally impossible to be closeted without the use of scent suppressors. When a woman goes into heat, those pheromones can be smelled, as well, however, you can't smell when a person is attracted to you specifically. A person can "smell like" a place that they've been; this is like wearing perfume. While the fragrances generally mix together, a wolf's olfactory system, with some mental concentration, is capable of parsing the individual "scent ingredients" in order to obtain information about a person.

3) In a throwaway line in Chapter 1, I mentioned that Castiel in wolf form is twice the size of a normal wolf. After doing some more research, that means that Cas would be about 5'8" tall as a wolf, as a normal-sized North American wolf is about 2'10" tall. I've decided that I like that, so in this universe Omegas have the proportions of real wolves, Alphas are giant wolves, and Betas are in-between (about 4'3" tall). This is regardless of how tall you are as a person. Because who needs the Law of Conservation of Matter?

4) My girlfriend refers to her foster parents as "Aunt" and "Uncle", so I have Dean, Sam, and Charlie refer to their foster parents as "Aunt Ellen" and "Uncle Bobby".

5) When a couple marries, it's traditional for their married name to be that of the person with the "higher" type. Bobby and Gabriel are both Beta men married to Alpha women, so they took their wives' last names. (In mythology, "Chamunda" is an epithet of Kali, so I use it as her last name here.) When a same-type pair marries, it's customary to use the man's name.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The charge nurse had sent Castiel to the Fast Track unit of the ER upon hearing that his only complaint was the ankle injury, and true to their name he was done in about 45 minutes. X-rays had confirmed that he had indeed sprained his ankle, as well as sustained additional straining and tissue damage, and he was discharged with a pair of crutches, the expectation of using them for about two weeks, and a frustrated countenance. It wasn't his first time using crutches so he at least didn't have to acclimate himself to that, but now he was definitely stuck in Lawrence for the night.

Kevin was nowhere near ready for discharge, and Bobby, Ellen, and Jody were all staying with
him, so it was Kathleen who supplied Castiel with a ride back to the Roadhouse. she used the
drive as a chance to question Castiel along the same lines as Jody had before. Castiel gave much
the same answers.

"One last question," Kathleen said, when the Roadhouse was in sight. "What got you into the
"saving abducted children" gig?"

"Is the answer to that pertinent to the investigation?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then I would rather not say."

Kathleen pulled up alongside the building, stopping just a few feet from the front door. "So shall I
tell my boss that you do this out of the goodness of your heart?"

Johnny-come-lately goodness, maybe. "Whatever you want."

Castiel was able to open the passenger door and get out of the car by himself, but Kathleen had to
assist him into the actual building. Mercifully Kathleen left him there, excusing herself with the
need to get back to the police station and start filing a report, leaving Castiel to suddenly go red-
faced and embarrassed all by himself as the entire party screamed, in off-pitch unison, "BUT
WE'VE GOT THE BIGGEST! BALLS! OF! THEM ALL!"

When the Roadhouse had belonged to Ellen's parents, it had been a fully-stocked piano bar. After
inheriting it, she changed the layout, turning it into a bar & grill, hiding the regretfully underused
piano under a dust cover, and installing--at Ash's insistence--karaoke equipment. Dean, after
another beer, had decided that he was tired of moping over Lisa's absence and of Sam's party being
brought down by the introduction of kidnapping to the night's bank of discussion topics, and had
enlisted Ash in helping him fire up the karaoke machine. Benny had kicked them off with a
stammering rendition of Baby Got Back; then Jo tried her hand at drunkenly belting I Will Survive;
and the next hour or thereabouts had passed in a tipsy blur of off-key revelry until Dean grew
weary of the distinct lack of AC/DC being performed.

"Some balls are held for charity / And some for fancy dress / But when they're held for pleasure /
They're the balls that I like best," Dean slurried, his mouth pressed up against the microphone as if
he were singing the most heartfelt power ballad ever composed. "And my balls are always
bouncing / To the left and to the right / It's my belief that my big balls / Should be held every night
/ Oh!"

Castiel's musical repertoire comprised almost entirely of hymns. Balthazar listened to this kind of
stuff, so it wasn't that he was completely alien to it, but it definitely wasn't his preferred listening.
Nonetheless, Castiel couldn't keep his eyes, slightly hooded with embarrassment, from wandering
over to the man leading the party in a rousing chorus of double entendres. It had briefly passed
through Castiel's mind, when they had accidentally locked gazes, that Dean (who had identified
himself just before the ambulance took Castiel away) had the most attractive pair of eyes that he'd
ever seen. He couldn't see them now, of course, but he was seeing the rest of Dean, and the rest of
him...well...was also attractive.

He shelved the thought as he pushed his way into the kitchen, with the help of an already ajar door,
and searched out the phone.

"Chamunda summer home. And some're not."
"Do you really have to answer the phone with a crank call?"

"Well hello to you too, little brother," Gabriel said. "Sounds like someone's a tad agitated."

"I got hurt on a mission; I think I have the right to sound agitated."

"How do you mean, "hurt"?" In his home in Gardner, Gabriel stood up from his chair; Kali looked up from where she was walking Inias through his math homework.

"Sprained ankle. Nothing serious. Just enough to take me out of commission."

"Oh, that sucks, man." Gabriel mouthed He's fine to his wife; Kali nodded and returned to assisting their eldest son. "How's your, uh, rescue puppy? He okay? She?"

"I don't know. He's at the hospital still."

"You're not there anymore? Where are you exactly?"

"Lawrence. I'm at a restaurant called the Roadhouse."

"Huh. Never heard of it."

"Think you can find it?"

"You want me to come get you? Now?"

"I realize that it's late," Castiel said through gritted teeth; a sharp pain had out of nowhere attacked his ankle and he nearly doubled over. How could a sprain hurt so much? "If you could possibly swing early tomorrow morning, that would be appreciated. The people who run this place are holding a wedding tomorrow and I don't want to crash it."

"The, uh." Castiel turned around to see Dean, obviously buzzed but still lucid, and a little sweaty, standing in the kitchen doorway. "The wedding is public, tomorrow. They're having it on the courthouse steps. The reception's a private event, but it's here and they ordered enough food for tomorrow and Thanksgiving, so don't think you'd be putting anyone out by sticking around."

"I couldn't get you tomorrow, anyway, Cas," Gabriel said, to silence as Castiel was taking a moment to process the fact that Dean, in the middle of his intense performance, must have noticed him coming into the restaurant. The old phone had a surprisingly good receiver, and Gabriel had heard everything Dean said. "Kali's got a business meeting out of town and she's taking the car after she drops the kids off at school."

"What...what about Anna?" Castiel asked, coming back to the present.

"Sorry, bro, she already flew out to spend Thanksgiving with her in-laws." Gabriel heard Castiel growl softly. "Looks like you're gonna have to spiffy up for that wedding, unless you wanna ask any of our--"

"No." Balthazar and Samandriel didn't have licenses (well, Balthazar didn't have one anymore; Balthazar was also the reason why Gabriel no longer had his own vehicle); Rachel had a license but no car; Joshua only had an old junker that was held together by prayer and duct tape; and no way would Castiel ask any of the others, even those who might agree to come get him.

"Sorry, Cassie. We can come get you first thing on Thanksgiving, but Kali's not going to be back until late tomorrow, so that's the earliest we could get there."
"I mean it, man, it's really not a problem if you're at the wedding," Dean said, sounding a little insistent.

Castiel had broken into barns, warehouses, clubs, and all manner of private homes, from trailers to mansions; he had subdued enraged Alphas and Omegas whose terror fueled impossible amounts of adrenaline; he had calmly talked down law enforcement that suspected him of being in on the child abuse. And petty social faux pas, of all things, were his undoing.

"I...that's...uh...nyegh...fine. Okay. I'll stay here."

"Awesome," Dean said, and those damn gorgeous eyes maybe-sorta-kind lit up a bit.

"We'll come get you first thing Thanksgiving morning, Cas," Gabriel assured. "I'll look this place up for directions. The Roadhouse? In Lawrence?"

"Yeah," Castiel replied, automatically.

"Cool. See you then, little bro. Take care of your ankle."

"I will."

"Night."

"Good night."

Castiel hung up the phone and rounded on Dean. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Hey, thank you for rescuing Omega kids. Least we can do is invite you to a party."

"You are sure this is okay? I don't want to cause a problem. With your brother and his wife or..." Ellen had proven herself a force to be reckoned with "...the Alpha."

"When Aunt Ellen told you to stay the night, she was inviting you to the wedding." Castiel slightly cocked his head at the use of the epithet; he hadn't been paying attention before, but now he could smell that there was no biological relation to Ellen coming off of Dean. "And there's a reason why this shindig is public, we'll just leave it at that. Seriously, dude, don't feel awkward. You're a guest now."

That didn't exactly make Castiel feel less awkward, but it stopped his protests. Dean held the door open for him to hobble through, directing him towards a two-seater table where a tray bearing the last of the finger food had been placed.

"Figured you'd be hungry," Dean said, pulling a chair out slightly for Castiel to awkwardly seat himself in. Dean dropped himself into the other chair, helping himself to an apple slice off the tray. "So, broken?"

"Just sprained."

"I've been there," Dean said with a sympathetic grimace. "That blows, man."

"Dean!" Both of them looked across the room; Sam was standing by the door with Benny, his hands cupped around his mouth as a makeshift megaphone. "Come say good-bye to your boyfriend!"

"Be right back," Dean said, standing up, leaving Castiel with a sudden dejected feeling. Of course someone as gorgeous as Dean already had a partner. Though their behavior was a bit odd...from his
vantage point Castiel saw Dean joking with the other man--he would guess, correctly, that Dean was ribbing on him for leaving--and then hug him, but not in an especially romantic way. Tight, but one-armed and short, with no kiss or cuddle to accompany it, and the man left without looking back.

"Your boyfriend?" Castiel couldn't stop himself from asking when Dean returned to the table.

"Who, Benny? No. Not for a long time." Dean reached out, this time picking up a melon slice skewered on a toothpick. "Oh yeah, I should introduce you to everyone," he said, with his mouth full; there was an oddly endearing quality about it. He swallowed before continuing. "All right, so that's Sam and Jess, in case you forgot." He pointed to the couple, who it looked like were beginning to stealthily clean up the tables that people were vacating. "And that's my sister Jo, and my other sister Charlie." He pointed to each of them in turn. "You can probably smell it, but just to be clear, me and Sam are bio brothers, but we were adopted. Charlie too."

"Three of my brothers are adopted, as well."

"Oh, cool. So, um, anyway, that's the nuclear family. That mullet with a person attached to it over there is Ash; he's Aunt Ellen's little brother; he lives with us, too. And him over there, that's Garth, he's Uncle Bobby's cousin. Garth's a pack dependent; he lives on the pond a ways behind the house." Dean waved his hand in the general direction. "Got a houseboat."

Castiel nodded to show he was keeping up.

"That's Rufus, and you're already acquainted with Jody; they're friends of Uncle Bobby's. And you're gonna meet Missouri and Pamela tomorrow; they're family friends, too. That guy who just left, he's Benny, he's a friend of me and he's probably rushing off to see his fiancee because he's whipped. Her name's Andrea; you might see her tomorrow." That seemed to put Benny firmly in the ex-boyfriend camp, for which Castiel felt mildly relieved.

Dean ran down a list of names--Barry, Andy, Lily, Max, Lindsay, Zach, Rebecca, and Brady ("I don't like that guy. He's sketchy as fuck.")--that were friends of Sam and Jess. Jess had some family in attendance that Dean didn't know well enough to be able to identify, beyond her parents. Castiel had some trouble attaching names to faces, especially since some of them had already left for the night, and especially since Dean seemed a little irritated to be pointing Jess's family out, but something about Dean's voice was musical in the way it commanded Castiel's attention. Dean could be reciting the phone book right now and it'd be fascinating.

"You guys done with that?" Sam broke the reverie; he and Jess, ever glued to his side, were looking down at the tray on Dean and Castiel's table.

"No," Dean said, leaning over the table protectively. "In fact this guy here hasn't even touched it yet," he added, pushing the tray towards Castiel. "And dude, Sammy, are you two actually cleaning up? It's your own party."

"Well, I'm not gonna leave it for Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby to do when they get back."

"Guys, seriously, sit the fuck down; the girls and I'll clean this shit up when everyone leaves."

Sam and Jess looked a little hesitant to stop, and Castiel saw out of the corner of his eye Dean look slightly...annoyed. It took Castiel a moment to smell the Beta and Omega wafting off the couple, and he nearly cringed. Helpmeets and servants, indeed.

"You're bossy," Sam finally said, earning a giggle from Jess.
"I'm the big brother, I get to be," Dean said. "Now sit. Pretty please."

Sam reached over to another table and grabbed a chair, pulling it to Dean and Castiel's table and straddling it.

"Jess, you didn't sing yet," Dean said, almost accusingly, before she could get her own chair.

"You are bossy," Jess said, laughing.

"Not an order, just an observation," Dean said, affecting innocence. "Seems weird for the bride to not get a chance to shine."

"I will be doing plenty shining tomorrow," Jess said, poking Dean's nose. "And maybe our guest would like the chance to sing?" She turned her face to Castiel. "We can bring the mic over here so you don't have to stand up."

"I'm afraid I'll have to decline," Castiel said, finally picking up an apple slice. "Unless you're particularly interested in hearing me butcher Amazing Grace."

"I don't think we even have the backing track for that," Sam put in. "But I agree with Dean that Jess should sing."

"Sa~m," Jess said, her face going pink.

"What?"

"Sa~m," Jess repeated, squirming and flailing her hands.

"Wha~t?"

"Oh my God, you two," Dean muttered.

"Jess, sing for us," Sam said, contorting his face into his best puppy dog look. "Don't you love me? Don't you want to honor my requests?"

Jess fixed him with a glacier-melting glare.

"Babe, you really should," Sam said, and how suddenly the teasing left Sam's voice almost gave Castiel whiplash.

Jess's glared melted into a frown that she directed towards her hands. She fidgeted, looking around the room, at certain people and then at the guests in general, before dropping her head down again.

"Jess." Sam reached out, taking her hands in both of his; she glanced up, but didn't lift her chin. "Please?"

Jess inhaled deeply, for a beat or two longer than expected, and exhaled out an "Okay," that sounded anything but. "Lemme just...talk to Ash."

Sam drew her hands forward, to kiss the back of her fingers. "Thanks, babe."

Jess stuck out her tongue, but she was finally smiling again, and she flounced away from their table with an air of cheeriness that almost wasn't put on. Sam and Dean exchanged a look; Sam appeared mildly victorious, but it was tempered by moroseness.

"Jess is a fantastic singer," Sam informed Castiel. "But she just...hasn't sung in front of people in
awhile."

Castiel glanced over at Jess, who was pointing something out in a binder to Ash. The scars and burn marks he had been doggedly trying to politely ignore were shining under the light.

"Anyway. Proper introduction." Sam stuck his hand out. "Sam Harvelle."

"Castiel Shurley." Castiel took it, shaking briefly. "Congratulations, again. How long have you two been together?"

"Eight years."

"Puppy lovers," Dean said by way of explanation, when he saw that Castiel was trying to figure out how old Sam was. "Middle school crush they never grew out of."

"That's sweet," Castiel said, genuinely. Despite the amount of siblings he had raising the statistical likeliness of it, he'd never encountered puppy lovers: children who, though they wouldn't have a sex drive until they turned 17, formed a friendship so intimate that it just naturally bloomed into a romance once they came of age. "So you two are...20? 21?"

"20, both of us. We're going to be living up there." Sam pointed towards the ceiling, to the second floor apartment of the Roadhouse. "For the next few years, at least."

Castiel was a little surprised that someone as...territorial as Ellen was going to allow another mated pair on her property. Though not unheard of, it tended to cause some legal issues, which was why consent from the primary pair was needed for such a marriage to take place. Of course, Ellen was an Alpha, so maybe she thought she could handle any problems, or that Sam and Jess wouldn't challenge her. Or maybe, he amended in his head, Sam was Ellen's son, and she would probably be less strident towards him than a stranger like Castiel.

"All right ladies and gentleman, this is our last song of the evening," Ash said into his operator's microphone. "We want to thank you all for showing up tonight and giving some love to the bride and groom. Get home safe and get your asses to the courthouse tomorrow 1 pm for the wedding of the decade. And now, to play you out, here she is, the blushing bride, our Lady of Song, the one, the only, Jessica~!"

Jo cheered loudly from the back of the restaurant, followed after a beat by Charlie. Dean let out a whoop, followed by a "You're amazing, babe!" from Sam; Castiel elected to quietly smile at her. Jess's face was pink under the stage lights, her thumbs and index fingers looped together as she hunched towards the standing microphone.

"This is for you, Sam," she said, quietly, the microphone only picking up her last three words. "This is for Sam," she said, a bit more clearly, a lot more pointedly, and no longer directed at her fiance.

The intro, at first soft, suddenly began filling the room, and Sam shifted in his seat, recognizing it as the song Jess had suggested for their first dance, but that he had rejected for being "too sad".

"You've seen the world; done it all; had your cake now / Diamonds brilliant in Bel Air now / Hot summer nights, mid July, when you and I were forever wild / The crazy days, city lights, the way you'd play with me like a child."

Her voice was trembling a bit as she launched into the first chorus.

"Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful? / Will you still love me when I
got nothing but my aching soul? / I know you will, I know you will, I know that you will / Will you still love me when I'm no longer beautiful?"

From the corner of his eye Castiel saw some of the people--the ones Dean had identified as belonging to Jess's family--shift uncomfortably, and Dean was glaring at them. Sam was frowning, but his eyes, holding a far more tender expression than his mouth, were on Jess.

"I've seen the world, lit it up as my stage now / Channeling angels in the new age now / Hot summer days, rock 'n' roll, the way I'd play for you at my show / And all the ways I got to know your pretty face and electric soul / Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful? / Will you still love me when I got nothing but my aching soul? / I know you will, I know you will, I know that you will / Will you still love me when I'm no longer beautiful?"

She seemed bolstered, now, maybe from Sam's gaze, maybe from the righteousness that tinged the lyrics. She was a good vocalist, and obviously a trained one. There was more to it though...she seemed like the kind of person who was moved by music itself; so much so that that her effort to emote perfectly had melted her nerves and puddled them into her hands, which now gripped the microphone stand both out of passion and in an effort to abate the shaking.

"Dear Lord, when I get to Heaven, please let me bring my man / When he comes, tell me that You'll let him in; Father, tell me if you can / Oh, that grace, oh, that body / Oh, that face makes me wanna party / He's my sun, he makes me shine like diamonds / Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful? / Will you still love me when I got nothing but my aching soul? / I know you will, I know you will, I know that you will / Will you still love me when I'm no longer beautiful? / Will you still love me when I'm no longer beautiful? / Will you still love me when I'm not young and beautiful?"

The song ended abruptly, on a breathy pianissimo that seemed to take all of Jess's energy with it. She wilted away from the microphone, looking a little flushed, and mumbled a barely-audible "thank you" to the people who were clapping for her...which was not everyone in the room.

"Your fiancee sings beautifully," Castiel said, leaning towards Sam. "You sing beautifully," Castiel amended, once Jess made her way back to their table.

"Thank you," Jess said, choosing to sit in Sam's lap instead of on a chair; he kissed her shoulder and whispered brief praise in her ear.

"Jess used to tour the karaoke circuit," Dean said.

"Singing every Tuesday night at a different Applebee's is not touring a circuit, Dean," Jess laughed.

"She was building a fanbase," Sam put in.

"Well, I am retiring early," Jess said. "I will spend the rest of my life sitting at home, not having kids, and generally being good for nothing."

Sam squeezed Jess's sides and she let out a yelp, turning her head to gently, but warningly, nip Sam's ear.

"Don't tickle me."

"Don't say mean things about yourself."

"You guys are killing me," Dean muttered, rolling his eyes. "Look at these two little shits, Cas. Look at these assholes rubbing their stupid perfect relationship all up in my face."
"I don't know what you're talking about Dean," Sam said, wrapping his arms around Jess's waist and pressing her close to him. "We don't have a perfect relationship."

"Oh, yeah, far from it," Jess added, twisting her torso so she leaned into Sam, wreathing her arms around his neck. "Sometimes he forgets give me a back rub after class." She kissed his forehead. "He's the literal worst."

"Yeah, and there are some days during the week when she doesn't bake me cookies," Sam added, reaching up to stroke Jess's hair. "I mean, that's practically abuse."

"Okay, barf," Dean said, standing up. "That's enough for one night. You two can stay here and be nauseating, but I have to get the fuck out of here before I heave."

"Where're you headed?" Castiel asked.

"Uh..." Dean glanced around, obviously puzzling, until an idea struck him. "Y'know, since the party's winding down, I might as well take you over to the house and get you situated."

"You know where we're putting him?" Sam asked.

"Guestroom, I 'xpect," Dean said, grinning. "We'll figure it out. They can always move him around." Just as before, Dean offered his hand to Castiel, who finagled to use it in conjunction with his crutches in order to stand. "See you two in like twenty minutes. And don't you fucking dare clean up."

Dean made short work of pushing through the room towards the door, Castiel following at some distance behind. Dean made it to the front with enough time to grab and put on his coat before Castiel got there; Dean held the door open for him, again, and let it bang shut behind him.

"All right, so," Dean said once they were safely outside, clapping his hands together and rubbing them briskly. "Easiest way to get from here to home is if I carry you."

"...I'm sorry?"

Dean pointed to the house. "It's not far enough away to need to drive, so I don't have my car. Normally I'd tell you to walk your own self there but the ground's too uneven for using crutches. There are like a million rocks and ditches and tree roots you can trip over."

"I think I'll be fine," Castiel said, hoping it was too dark for Dean to see how red his face was becoming.

"You gotta give it up with this I-feel-bad-about-people-helping-me thing you've got going on. I really don't mind, and you really don't want to try getting to the house on crutches."

"And you really don't have to carry me," Castiel returned, his voice thick.

In the slightest ray of moonlight, Castiel saw Dean pause, and then stiffen, his face hardening.

"Dude, is this some dickish Alpha thing? You can't accept help from a pansy-ass Omega, or something?"

"What? No!"

"Then what's your deal?"

There is no tasteful way of saying that one is afraid of certain physiological reactions that can be
catalyzed by bodily contact with someone you find attractive. "There's no "deal". I am just...unused...to relying on people like this. Regardless of their type."

"Welp, like I said, you gotta get over that. Look, the house is only like two hundred feet away. It'll all be over in five minutes. You can put up with this for that long, right?"

For November, it sure felt like July to Castiel's face. "I suppose," he said finally, through gritted teeth. "How?"

"Well, you're definitely not a small child, so I can't carry you in wolf form." Castiel tried to imagine all 6 feet and change of Dean morphing into a 2'10" tall wolf; the image was silly and endearing all at once. "So you'll have to piggyback with me as a human."

Well that was just swell.

"Either that or bridal-style, but I don't wanna steal Sam'n'Jess's thunder," Dean continued, grinning.

Castiel prayed often. He prayed for the children he rescued, and those he didn't, and he prayed for their families. He prayed for strength, for courage, for forgiveness and the ability to forgive. He had not ever prayed to not pop a boner while being carried on the back of the hottest person he'd ever seen. Then again that was an extremely specific thing to pray for.

"So," Dean said, "how's the kid?"

Good. An entirely unsexy topic of conversation that could let Castiel ignore that Dean's arms were hooked backwards around his knees, and he was leaning heavily against Dean's back, arms looped around the man's shoulders, the crutches clutched horizontally in his hands. "I don't know. We were in separate parts of the ER."

Dean nodded. "So what happens now?"

"Well, there'll be an investigation."

"No, I mean, what happens to him?"

"That's up to him and his mother," Castiel said; without realizing it he had settled his chin on Dean's shoulder. "I suppose they'll go home, maybe send him to counseling."

"Do they usually go?" Dean swerved to avoid a large rock. "The kids, I mean."

"I've only successfully rescued a handful of kids," Castiel admitted. "I don't know what the kids who found homes chose to do. Of the few I've left at my brother's church, half of them see somebody. They'll talk to Joshua or to a licensed therapist. But the others refuse to."

"Should they?"

Castiel paused, trying to gauge how loaded Dean's question was.

"D'you fall asleep back there?" Dean asked after a long moment, jostling Castiel a bit in his attempt to reposition him more comfortably.

"No-!" Castiel quickly jerked his pelvis back, willing nothing to happen. "No," he repeated. "And...that's hard to say," he continued. "Most people do benefit from therapy. We--my brother and I--have a theory that when you internalize your experiences, they seem worse and worse every time you recall them, to the point where thinking about them and trying to do anything about them
becomes overwhelming." Mentioning his brother made it okay for Castiel to settle against Dean again. "But, on the other hand, talking too soon, or talking to the wrong person, can be detrimental to recovery. There's working through your pain, and then there's just continually reopening a wound."

Dean made a noise in his throat that was difficult to parse. They bobbed as Dean stepped over a tree branch.

"If this isn't too personal, are you asking because of your sister?"

Dean made a small jump, avoiding a depression in the ground. "Just asking in general."

Definitely too personal. They fell quiet, concentrating on their own thoughts, until Dean let him down on the front porch carefully, unlocking the door while letting himself be used as a support beam until Castiel got his crutches under him.

"Okay, so this is the living room here, as you can probably tell." The presence of a couch was a tip-off. "Over there," Dean pointed to the right, towards a door, "is the kitchen and dining room. Up there," Dean gestured towards the stairs that sat right outside the kitchen door, "is all our bedrooms except Ash's. If you thought someone with hair like that was a basement dweller, congratulations, you've won the solid gold Kewpie doll. Basement stairs are over there," Dean pointed towards the furthest left corner of the room, where a little niche was carved out, "and you can't see it from this angle, but the door to the bathroom is opposite that. There's another one upstairs, but you probably won't be using that one. And this right here," Dean pointed to a door on the nearest left corner, "is the guestroom. Don't mind all the spices and dishes and crap; the kitchen's small so the room doubles as a pantry."

"Shouldn't I stay on the couch? So Kevin gets the room?"

"No, 'cause I'm gonna bet that they're gonna have Charlie sleep with Jo, and Kevin'll take Charlie's room." Or Charlie might slip into his and Sam's room again.

The guestroom was, indeed, stocked pretty fully with seasonings and dishware, but the bed was clear. Dean left Castiel to settle in while he ran upstairs, returning with a pair of pajamas, and...

"...the Bible?" Castiel asked, taking it from Dean's hands.

Dean shrugged, sitting on the bed by Castiel's feet. "Thought you'd want something to read. And you, uh, were giving off hints that you're the religious type, so."

"I am. Thank you."

"Be careful with that; it's our only copy. Belonged to Uncle Bobby's mom."

"I'll treat it like it's sacred. Since it, well, is."

Dean snorted a laugh. "Good. So, anyway, you know where the bathroom is and where the kitchen is. I'm guessing you can get changed without any help?"

"Yes. Not my first time with an ankle injury."

"Okay. Oh, speaking of clothes, I might have something halfway decent to loan you for the wedding, too."

"Thank you. I'm sorry for troubling you."
"If you apologize for us putting you up again, I'm going to punch you in the mouth."

"Duly noted."

"Good." Castiel thought he saw Dean wink at him. "All right, so you got a book, you got clothes..."

"I have protection," Castiel filled in, drawing forth the knife he had used to cut Kevin loose from the pocket of his trench coat.

"Shit, dude, is that an Angel Blade?" Castiel nodded. "Man, fuck you. I've been coveting the shit out of those things for like three years. And don't you dare tell me you have more than one. Nobody should be rich enough to drop that much money on fucking knives."

Castiel conspicuously kept his mouth shut.

Dean rummaged around in his pocket before drawing forth his old flip phone and tossing it to Castiel. "The Roadhouse is in my contacts list, call it if you need me. Not sure how long it'll take us to finish cleaning, so don't wait up."

"Okay."

"Okay." Dean seemed unsure of what to do, and it took him a minute to finally stand up and go to the door. "All right, so, sleep tight. See you in the morning."

"Good night, Dean."

"'Night, Cas."

Dean shut the door behind him and Castiel collapsed back onto the pillow, covering his face with the late Mrs. Singer's Bible. He was far too exhausted to read it, but merely holding onto it had the same effect as holding a cherished comforter or stuffed animal. It helped that Dean had left a whiff of his scent on the cover.

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for He has looked with favor upon me," Castiel recited. "From this day all generations will call me blessed; the Almighty has done great things for me, and Holy is His name. He has shown mercy on those who need Him; He has shown the strength of His arm; He has lifted up the lowly; He has come to the aid of His servant. Oh my God, I thank You for all the benefits which I have received from You this day. Give me light to see what sins I have committed, and grant me grace to be truly sorry for them. Amen."

Normally he would have spent several minutes enumerating the day's blessings, but he'd had barely enough energy to get the bare bones of that prayer out. He was sorely tempted to fall asleep right then and there, but he felt guilty at the thought of Dean having brought him down sleep clothes for nothing, and so he spent the next three minutes awkwardly undressing and redressing.

Fuck, the pajamas smelled like Dean, too.

Chapter End Notes

6) I was inspired to use the song Jess sings by this video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkuaS1JceM) which is probably my favorite
fanvid ever, Destiel or otherwise. I adjusted the lyrics slightly to better fit my fic; you can imagine that it was Jess who changed the lyrics.

7) Cas's prayer is a mix of the Prayer of Thanksgiving and the Magnificat, which according to my Daily Prayers booklet, courtesy of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, are Nighttime Prayers. Being religious myself, I wanted to give Cas a positive relationship with religion.

Thank you so much for the kudos and comments! Merry Christmas to those who celebrate!
Charlie woke up around 2 am, her forehead drenched in sweat, feeling as though she had swallowed sawdust.

"Jo," she croaked out, gracelessly kicking the covers off. "Jo."

"What?" came Jo's irritable snap.

"Do you have coolants?" From somewhere in her blurry mind she recalled that Kevin was going to be using her room, and he might be there now; it'd be better to not disturb him by searching for her own stash there.

"No." Jo turned on her side, pulling the comforter tighter to her. Jo was one of the blessed few who was barely phased by her heat...her body temperature stayed normal throughout; her pelvic region maintained status quo; she could talk to people she found attractive without disregarding all social mores dictating personal space.

"Jo, I'm dying here."

"I think mom keeps some in the bathroom."

Oh happy day. Charlie nearly fell out of bed and staggered out into the hallway. Being out from under the blankets and away from Jo's body heat was helping, as was the cold air that permeated the rest of the house. Some coolants and a cup of tap water and she'd be right as rain.

"Fu~ck," Charlie moaned; the bathroom door was shut, and light spilled out from underneath it.

"I'll be out in a minute," an unfamiliar male voice called back softly; Charlie heard the toilet flushing, then the sink running, and finally the click of the door unlocking and the squeak of it opening.

"Oh, hey." Charlie said, once her eyes adjusted to the light and she saw who it was. "Kevin, right? When did you guys get in?"

"About a half hour ago." Without any emergent injuries, Kevin had been discharged after Amelia
felt him to be sufficiently stabilized.

"Didja see my room yet?"

"...you're Charlie?"

"Yep." She had to grin a little bit at the nonplussed look on his face. "Thought I was a boy?"

"...yeah."

"Nope! All female." Even without Charlie gesturing up and down her torso to indicate her curves and bust, Kevin could smell her heat coming off her in waves. "Charlie, short for Charlotte." She stepped passed him into the bathroom, opening the cabinet above the sink. "You know that Jo's a girl too, right?"

"I do now." Kevin hadn't been paying much attention on the ride back to the Harvelle house.

"Yep. Jo, short for Joanna. Sam's a boy, though. Sam not short for Samantha. And Dean is of the dudely persuasion, too, if that wasn't immediately obvious."

"Thanks for the clarification."

"You're welcome." Having found what she was looking for, she shut the cabinet again and began tearing open the packaging. "So did you see my room?"

"Yeah. It's pretty cool," Kevin said, trying to conjure up an accurate image of Charlie's bedroom: a fully-stocked floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, a desk on which sat an old computer attached to various DIY electronics projects, walls covered in posters and shelves sporting various figurines and memorabilia, and most interestingly, a sword leaning against a corner as nonchalantly as if it were an umbrella.

"It is beyond cool," Charlie corrected, popping two pills in her mouth and filling a plastic cup with water. "Oh, and the rules," she said, pushing the coolants to the side of her mouth with her tongue, "one - don't touch the sword, two - don't touch my computer or I will cut your hand off with the sword, and three - you can read any book on my shelf except The Hobbit."

"Okay."

Charlie put her cup to her lips, tilted her head back, and swallowed. From the corner of her eye she saw Kevin watching her. "Heat sucks. Be thankful you don't have to deal with it."

"You wanna trade traumas?"

Charlie took her time filling up the cup again, setting it down on the sink, and putting away the rest of the coolants.

"Sorry, kiddo, I already have that Pokemon card."

It was just as well that Kevin was momentarily lost for words, as Ellen appeared behind him, frowning. "Why aren't you two in bed?"

"Had to pee," Kevin managed to get out.

"Needed coolants," Charlie added.

"Well if you're all done, you should get to sleep. Big day tomorrow. Kevin." She settled a heavy,
sleepy hand on his head. "You don't have to join us."

"No, I want to." He had been vaguely paying attention when Bobby and Ellen had mentioned the wedding they were hosting the next day.

"You sure?"

"I'd rather not get locked up in a house alone again."

Ellen's eyes had been squinted against the harsh glare of the bathroom light, and now she closed them. Her hand lifted off Kevin's head and descended on his shoulder, and he jerked back as she pulled him against her. With the laissez-faire of someone equally burdened with tiredness and sympathy she wrapped her arm around his head, keeping his cheek pressed against her sternum, and reached out with her other arm to Charlie, who she caught around the back of the neck with her hand and dragged forward, to rest on her shoulder.

"I have to brush my teeth." The embrace had lasted only as long as it took for Ellen to inhale deeply and exhale slowly, and she let them go as nonchalantly as she had brought them to her. "Go to bed."

Ellen ushered them out of the way, leaving them to adjust themselves to the lack of light and warmth when she shut the door.

"So is this a...like a halfway house or something?" Kevin asked, once Charlie began padding back down the hallway.

"It's turning into one," Charlie replied; Kevin took an extra large step to catch up with her. "But no, it's just a regular ol' home. I'm the only rescue...well, no, I'm lying. But I'm the only...um...one like you."

"Did that guy...Castiel...did he bring you here, too?"

"No. This is the first time we've met him. It really is a total accident that he brought you here."

"How did you get out?"

They were stopped outside Charlie's bedroom.

"I, um...I did some things."

"Like..."I killed someone" things?"

"No," Charlie said, with the weakest laugh she had ever managed. "Wish I did, though. Do I really look like the type who can kill somebody?"

"I was just thinking about you impaling someone with that sword."

"That would've been awesome," Charlie said, her eyes suddenly wide with hypothetical possibilities. "But, alas, I didn't get that sword until after I got adopted. We went to the Great Plains Renn Faire for my birthday in April; Dean, Sam, and Jo pitched in and got it for me. I haven't slain any dragons or traffickers with it yet, but I'll let you know as soon as I do."

"Let me know beforehand, so I can help."

"Ah-ah-ah. What's Rule Number 1?"
"Don't touch the sword," Kevin recited sheepishly.

"Very good! You will just have to get your own."

"I can't. I'm 12. 13 in a few days, but that doesn't make a difference."

"Well, maybe you can ask your mom to get you one." Charlie tried to ignore the little pang that hit her stomach at the mention of a mother. "I'm sure she's 100% behind you in your effort to stab some assholes."

"Happy birthday long-lost son! Here, have a deadly weapon. For much stabbing!" Kevin moved his hand through the air, miming a sword piercing a stomach, and blew a raspberry.

Something in Kevin's tone struck the part of Charlie's brain that handled humor and she laughed. She paused for a breath, and then broke down in a fit of snorts and giggles. It was infectious; Kevin at first laughed sympathetically, then in genuine amusement at her over-the-top reaction. She staggered forward a bit, pushing Kevin into the door jamb, and that was that; both of them dissolved into breathless delirium, replete with high-pitched wheezing and tears leaking out from behind squinted-shut eyes.

"Fuck you guys, do you have any idea what time it is?" Jo was leaning out of her doorway, glaring daggers at them through her mop of bedhead.

"Fuck you Jo, it's stabbing time, that's what time it is," Charlie said, punctuating her words and the air with a pointed finger; the effect was lost when she doubled over mid-sentence.

Jo snarled, not quite slamming the door, but certainly shutting it with a vengeance. This made Charlie laugh even more, and she stumbled into her own bedroom, Kevin following in much the same vein, though he at least made it to the bed to sit down; Charlie gave up and collapsed herself onto the floor, face buried in her carpet.

"You know," Kevin said, once he had caught his breath, "that wasn't really that funny."

"Who cares." Charlie rolled over, sighing loudly in an attempt to stifle whatever giggles might still be lurking within her. "That, my friend," she pointed at Kevin, backwards as her feet faced the doorway and her head, the bed, "was your first post-rescue giggle fit. They will only get better."

Charlie heard no reply except the soft thump of Kevin's head hitting her pillow. After a few seconds of quiet Charlie wriggled her way back onto her stomach, then onto her hands and knees, and she crawled up the side of her mattress to sit atop her bed. Kevin lay listlessly on his side, the liquid mirth that had run from his eyes just a minute earlier now replaced with a different kind of tears.

"That'll get better too, Kev," Charlie said, reaching out to muss his hair. It was long and unwashed-greasy, and Charlie bit her lip, reminded of how her own hair had felt filthy on her head the day Dean carried her into the Roadhouse, Sam running ahead to let their foster-parents know what was happening.

"How?" All the moisture in his body seemed to be leaking from his eyes; the question was forced through a dry, cracked throat.

"Well, first thing, you get a haircut." It had taken Ellen and Jo tag-teaming with a pair of scissors and an electric razor, months of growing out, and more than a few bottles of candy-apple-red dye, for Charlie's hair to feel clean again. To feel like it was hers again. "And, um, maybe get a piercing or a tattoo or something."
"No way my mom will let me do that."

"She might." Charlie put her hand on his shoulder, awkwardly rubbing full-palm circles on it. "You're gonna be surprised at what people let you do when they know."

"I don't want people to know."

"Okay, okay," Charlie said, trying to keep her voice calm, trying to keep him calm. "And they don't have to. I mean, some people do. But not everybody."

"Why do some people have to know?"

"Well, they already do know, that's the thing."

Kevin tucked his face fully into Charlie's pillow, his hands gripping her sheets.

"I'm sorry, I'm not helping." There was a frustrated stinging sensation at the corners of her eyes.

"No," came the muffled response. "Don't feel bad." Kevin's face emerged, wet and pink and pinched tight. "It just...it sucks. Everything sucks."

"I know." She swallowed. "Everything will suck for a long time. And then it'll get better. And then it'll suck again, and get better again. 'Round and 'round and 'round it goes, where it stops, nobody knows."

She had accompanied her paraphrasing of the nursery rhyme by circling her finger over Kevin's face, and she ended it with poking him in the nose. He batted her hand away, but he didn't seem actually annoyed by it. She settled her hand on his shoulder again, leaning back against the wall and lightly shutting her eyes. The coolants had started kicking in, and now that the original adrenaline rush of meeting and talking to a new person was wearing off, she was beginning to fade, fast.

"But you know, Kev, I'm...I'm more okay than I was. And you will be too."

"Doesn't feel like it," Kevin mumbled.

Charlie made a noise that sounded like words, hoping Kevin would interpret it into something that might help him; if he did he gave no sign of it. After a moment Charlie flopped, her head missing the pillow, hips and knees angled uncomfortably.

"Mind if I sleep here tonight?"

Kevin visibly stiffened, but then equally noticeably relaxed. The slightest hint of Charlie's scent gave her away as 100% homosexual, and besides she'd just taken coolants, in case she would have otherwise been even slightly tempted. "'Syour bed."

"Yeah, but I let you have it tonight, so that means you're the boss."

"So no rules?"

"The boss of the bed. Computer, sword, and Hobbit are all off-limits still."

"Darn." It was hard to tell if he was genuinely disappointed. "Why you wanna sleep here?"

"Pretty sure my sister will kill me if I try to go back to her room." Now didn't feel like the best time to tell Kevin that he'd probably have nightmares, if not tonight then on some other night, and that
she wanted to be there if they came for him in the next few hours. And Jo might not kill her, but she'd definitely be pissy.

"Nnn." Kevin tensed, but in preparation to move, as was made obvious in a second when he wriggled over, closer to the edge, and gave up some of the pillow.

"Thank you kindly." Charlie straightened herself out, stretching her back and legs, before reaching for her blanket and pulling it up over them.

"What else do I do?" Kevin asked suddenly, just as Charlie got herself settled and shut her eyes.

"Huh?"

"Haircut, piercing, tattoo...what else?"

"Whatever you want, Kevin," Charlie said through a yawn, rolling onto her back and covering her eyes with her arm. "It's up to you. "What do you plan to do with all your freedom~?"

Kevin could tell she was referencing something, but not what exactly. He pulled Charlie’s comforter tighter against him, as if using it to shield himself from his own befuddlement, and stayed quiet, leaving them both with the same thought: the question of if, for them, there ever was going to be freedom, in any meaningful sense of the word.

_Fucking Omega bitch._

Sam woke up when Jess kicked his leg. One of her more endearing habits was how even in human form, she twitched and snuffled like a dog in her sleep. Even though the back of her heel was sharp against his shin, the way she sighed and shifted in his arms made him instantly forgiving of it.

It also made him slightly hard.

He traced the back of his fingers against her cheek, drawing her hair away from her face, and through his bleary gaze saw that her face was scrunched up, eyes squinted shut. The long exhalation through her nose--because her lips were pressed tightly together--was accompanied by a high-pitched, distressed whine from her throat. He stroked her hair back again, letting his fingers rest slightly more heavily on her skin.

She was burning up.

_You practically invited me in, you little slut. You asked for this. Remember that._

His arm--the one she had fallen asleep on--came up around her chest; the other draped itself across her hip, resting itself on her lower stomach, and together they pulled her back, against him. Squeezing his eyes shut, he buried his face in the back of her neck, inhaling deeply as if the air could provide him strength just as much as it could oxygen.

_You were made to be owned, not loved, sweetheart._

There was the angry squeaking of mattress springs, followed by the _thump_ of a body hitting the hardwood, and then Sam sat up in bed; Jess stared up at him from the floor with wide eyes, panting heavily, trembling slightly.
"Sam...Sam I'm sorry."

"Jess..."

"I'm sorry, I just...I just need...I need a drink. I'm thirsty." She swallowed, hard, running a shaking hand through her hair. "I'll be...I'll be right back, okay?"

"Jess, wait."

"I just want some water," Jess said, clambering to her feet. "I'll be right back."

"Baby--" But Jess had already turned, her footsteps quick and heavy as she made for the door. The door creaked loudly as it opened, and the click of it shutting was almost deafening.

Sam watched the door for several long seconds, until the elbow he had propped himself up with began shaking with the effort, and he let it go slack. He collapsed back onto his bed, looking up at the ceiling, his hands folded tightly over his chest.

"Maybe we should call off the wedding."

Dean sighed heavily, finally opening his eyes. It had been awkward as hell pretending to sleep through that, and he was strangely grateful that Sam knew him well enough to know that he hadn't been able to. "You think she doesn't love you anymore or some silly shit like that?"

"No, it's not that, it's..." Sam moved his hands in the air, trying to come up with a tactful way to phrase things. "I just...maybe I shouldn't have proposed like I did. When I did. Maybe we should be waiting."

"The hell good would that do?" Dean muttered, trying not to make it obvious how half-hearted his words were.

"Dean, do you know what I did to Jess just now?"

"Do I want to know...?"

"I smelled the back of her neck." Sam sat up, drawing his knees closer to his chest and resting his elbows on them, his head in his hand. "I smelled. The back. Of her neck."

"Well don't spring it on her next time, Don Juan. Look, it's heat week, and that's rough on her, right? You're getting married tomorrow, and she just sang in front of the people for the first time in forever. She's just jittery right now, that's all."

"Dean--"

"Look, has she actually said anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like...I dunno, like "I don't want to have sex with you ever again"? "I don't want to marry you"? Something along those lines?"

"No."

"Do you think she's thinking those things?"

"No." He was almost sulking.
"Then that's that. You love her, she loves you, you've got a place to stay and a bright, beautiful future ahead of you. Waiting wouldn't improve a damn thing."

"Dean, it's not that simple and you know it."

"Sammy, what I know is that she's the one who asked you to marry her."

"No, Dean. She asked me not to leave her."

"You're splitting hairs, little bro."

"I'm really not, Dean. She just wanted me to not run out on her. That doesn't mean she was ready to jump back into the relationship and then take a level in it."

"I wasn't aware you guys ever ended the relationship that she had to jump back into."

"We didn't, but..." God, did Sam not want to be discussing the intricacies of his sex life with his brother, even though this had been simmering inside him for months, waiting to boil over. "Dean, that fire changed her. A year ago I wouldn't have had to push her on stage. A year ago, if I smelled the back of her neck, we would have..." he couldn't help but feel a little flushed, for both embarrassment and nostalgia, "...we would have had to sneak out. And yeah, I know we wouldn't have stayed that way forever, but that's something we were supposed to grow out of. Not get stolen from us."

He caught his breath and waited for Dean to speak, to throw in a sardonic quip; his brother stayed silent.

"And I'm...I'm not a douchebag who's gonna break up with her because she won't put out. I want her to take as much time as she needs to feel all right with everything again, but when you're married...you think you ought to, you know? People don't spend their first night as husband and wife not having sex if they can help it. I am asking her to accept a wedding night that's going to feel wrong and she's going to feel like that's her fault. And Christ, the wedding itself has been a total cock-up on my part, too. She's had basically zero input from the beginning, and I'm sure that total lack of control was just what she needed."

"All right, Sammy, enough," Dean said, loud enough for Sam to hear him, but quiet enough for Sam to not listen.

"It's like I offered to make her dinner," Sam said, as Dean sat up. "I offered her dinner, and then shit on a plate and handed it to her and told her that's all she could have."

"Sam. Please. Shut the fuck up."

"Dean--" But whatever Sam was going to say was lost to the ether, as one of Dean's pillows got acquainted with the side of Sam's head, and rather forcefully.

"All right! Time for younger brothers to shut their cakeholes and listen to their older brothers who may or may not have no fucking idea what they're talking about," Dean said, as his pillow fell to the floor beside Sam's bed. "Jess is an adult, right? Wears big-girl panties and everything. And she's had friggin' months to change her mind, but somehow despite being so out of your league you play different sports, she still wants to marry you. Tomorrow. Until she tells you otherwise, assume that this is the case, pre-wedding freak-out or not. Okay? Say "okay", Sammy."

"Okay, Sammy," Sam very nearly snarled, somehow managing to roll his eyes and narrow them at the same time.
"Good. And I realize that this is going to sound incredibly strange coming from me, but if you guys don't have sex tomorrow night, so what? You're married. You'll be living together. No adult supervision present or expected. You have the rest of your lives to get it on. And look at it this way: once you're married, she's on Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby's insurance for the next four years, which means maybe she'll actually get to see a shrink and you guys can sort the whole sex thing out."

Jess had once confided in Sam--and Dean had overheard--that her family's insurance didn't cover mental health expenses and she couldn't convince her parents to change plans. Sam and Dean meanwhile knew that Ellen and Bobby paid extra every month for coverage that none of their kids intended to use.

Sam collapsed back onto the bed, frowning at the ceiling.

"Come on, Sammy, knock it off. You and Jess've been together for eight incredibly long and stomach-turning years. You would've gotten married at some point anyway. Some knothead with a match and some lighter fluid shouldn't be allowed to fuck things up for you two."

"He's not," Sam said immediately, in the lowest, most dangerous tone Dean had ever heard him muster.

"Good. Then forget this "postponing" bullshit. You and Jess are going to declare your undying love in front of the whole world tomorrow, and then after we all get wasted, you two are going to head up to La Casa Roadhouse and boff like bunnies. Or not, whichever feels right. And this is going to be the best damn thing that ever happened to either of you, aside from the pleasure of my company, of course. You got it?"

"I got it," Sam said, a little listlessly, but with enough sincerity that Dean didn't feel compelled to make him say it again.

"Good. Now if you will kindly stop talking nonsense we can go the fuck back to bed."

"Princess needs her beauty sleep?"

"You bet your ass Princess needs her beauty sleep. Gimme back my pillow."

"You forgot the magic word."

"Gimme back my pillow, bitch."

With a concentrated stare Sam levitated the pillow off the floor, dragging it through the air slowly until it hovered right within Dean's reach, before jerking it up in the air just before Dean could grab it.

"Not in a hundred years, jerk."

"Oh my God, Charlie. I'm going to kill you."

Joanna Beth Harvelle was touchy about her sleep. Nine hours, uninterrupted. That's what she required. Once Charlie woke her up, that was it. No more sleep for Jo, not tonight. She had tried, valiantly, for one or two hours; it was hard to tell. But now every tap-tap of a branch against the
window was a scream in her ear; the moonlight drifting in was a lighthouse lamp shining directly in her face. She couldn't get comfortable. The room was too cold. The mattress was too hard. She had gone to bed mildly hungry and now her stomach was growling.

Fuck it. A mix of coffee, activity, and frothing resentment of her sister would get her through wedding day.

She opened her door the tiniest amount before taking wolf form; even at a little over 4', she could sneak through the house easier as a wolf than as a human. She nudged the door open just enough to let her body pass through, padded down the hallway and down the steps--taking care to lightly hop over the loose one that had sent more than one person skidding down the stairs--and looked up for the doorknob only to realize that the door to the kitchen was already open.

Her nostrils flared, but relaxed when they inhaled a familiar scent. Her nails clicked against the linoleum of the kitchen floor, alerting the guest to her presence the moment before Jo resumed human form.

"Whatcha doing up?"

Jess grunted in response, lowering her head back down into her arm, folded onto the table in front of her.

"Ugh, and you're drinking that Zinfandel swill my mom likes," Jo said, wrinkling her nose at the wine glass clutched in Jess's other hand. "Have a Mike's Hard or something, at least."

"What are you doing up?" Jess muttered into the table.

"Hungry." Jo punctuated her statement by opening the refrigerator door. "You?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"Not even cuddled up to my brother?" Jo teased, reaching back into the fridge for the container where they kept the deli meats. She took a bit of perverse pleasure in taking out the sliced moose; Sam refused to eat it. Moose were his favorite animal, apparently. Sam was weird.

"Jo..."

"What?" Jo came out of the fridge with her prize. Screw a sandwich, she'd eat the slices right out of the bag. "Want some?" She flopped down into a chair, holding out the package to Jess.

"No thanks."

"More for me." Jo rolled up a slice like a burrito and ate it, watching Jess lift her head and take a swig out of her wine glass. "What's up? Pre-wedding jitters? Cold feet?"

"Mmm."

"That a yes or a no?"

Another noncommittal grunt. Jess rotated the glass on its base, watching the wine slosh within the cup. "Just thinking."

"Yeah? 'Bout what?"

"You ask too many questions."
"Well you're marrying into my family; you will have to get used to my quirks." Jess tore off a strip of meat and popped it in her mouth. "So spill it, dear." Some of Jess's drink dripped over the edge of the glass. "I meant your guts, not the wine."

"You'd know about spilling guts," Jess mumbled.

For a moment Jo sat in stunned silence, before standing up, her chair scraping angrily against the floor. "Fuck you, Jess."

"Wait, wait...shit, that came out wrong, Jo. Jo, I'm sorry." Jess managed to catch her future sister-in-law by the wrist as she made for the door. "I'm tired. I'm slightly drunk. I didn't mean it like that. I'm so sorry, Jo."

"Well, how did you mean it then?" Jo said, through clenched teeth.

"I meant that...I meant that maybe you know about. What I'm thinking about."

"It would help if I had a damn clue what you were thinking about."

"I mean you have scars there," Jess pointed sloppily at Jo's abdomen, "and I have scars here," she gestured equally gracelessly to the left side of her body, "and you...you know."

"I know what?"

"About being scared."

Jo stepped heavily around the side of the table and sank into her chair again. "Scared in what way?"

"Scared because I'm so...I'm so..." Jess blinked several times, rapidly. "I'm so ugly, Jo. I'm fucking disfigured."

"That doesn't seem to bother Sam."

"It bothers me! And it will bother him. I know it. I look like Frankenstein's monster. Would you want to have sex with Frankenstein's fucking monster?"

"Whoa." Jo put up her hands as if physically guarding herself against Jess's words, momentarily taken aback at the specificity of her metaphor. "Who called you that?"

"My father."

"What? Jesus, why?"

"He was concerned," Jess drawled, leaning forward over the table, her bitterness almost palpable. "That maybe Sam wouldn't be staying interested in me for very long. Considering all the, you know, skin grafts and everything."

Jo's lips pinched together, almost painfully. "He said that to your face?"

"To my mom's face, actually." Jess tilted her head back and drained the rest of her glass.

"Shit, if my dad called me that..." But Jo's dad was a Beta, raised by an Omega mother; he knew better.

"God," Jess choked out, dropping her forehead onto her folded arm. "I'm hideous and a fucking cocktease and any tiny chance I had of giving him kids was shot all to hell. What a great fucking
catch I am."

"All right, that's enough." Jo stood up and reached over the table, taking Jess's wine glass. "First of all, let's get this out of the way: your dad's a fucking asshole. Second of all, the word "cocktease" is banned in this house. I did not particularly care to know about you guys' sex life but now that I unfortunately do, it is my solemn duty to tell you that if you do not want to have sex, that's that." Her face and neck suddenly heated up; her stomach twisted uncomfortably. "You don't feel guilty about it. And if Sam's making you feel guilty about it, I will kick him in the nuts on your behalf."

"Oh, Sam would never. Sam's a gentleman. A perfect fucking gentleman. And he loves me; he fucking loves me and I can offer him nothing but some burnt-ass sloppy seconds."

Jo jerked her head off the table when Jo's fist--the one clenched around the wine glass--slammed down on it, shattering the base and nearly sending Jo's knuckles into a puddle of glass shards.

"Don't you ever fucking call yourself that again, do you hear me?"

The two stared at each other--Jess's gaze frightened, Jo's infuriated--until Jo turned on her heel, marching the wine glass's remains over to the trash can.

"Sam is not the kind of guy to stay with someone out of pity," Jo said tightly, as the lid to the trash can gently flapped shut. "If he was bothered by how you look, or that fact that you can't have kids, he would have broken up with you already," she continued, returning to the table to gingerly pick up the pieces of broken glass on the table and drop them in her palm.

Jess watched silently as Jo threw out the rest of the wine glass, and then went to the sink to wash off any small grains of crystal that might remain on her palm.

"And you, Jessica Lee, are not fucking food that some asshole can slobber all over and ruin forever."

"Jo, I'm...I'm sorry if--"

"Go back to bed, Jess," Jo said, resting her hand on the counter as if steadying herself. "You're getting married tomorrow. You need the sleep."

Even in her slightly inebriated state Jess knew there was more to say, for both of them, but the part of her that had been sobered by the broken wine glass held her back. She got up, struggling a bit with her chair as her action hadn't been strong enough to move it back far enough; once it was sufficiently out of the way, she stumbled a bit as she went to the door.

"Jo?"

"What?" Jo said, more sharply than she intended.

"Tha-thanks. For...what you said. All of it."

"You're welcome," Jo said, with just enough conviction to carry her whisper.

Jess murmured a "good night", to which Jo responded in kind. She waited until Jess had passed through the kitchen door, and was audibly heading back upstairs, to gather herself and straighten up.

A Mike's Hard sounded pretty good right now.
She took it to the couch, stretching herself out on it and turning on the television, which she muted the second after she remembered there was a sleeping guest on the same floor. A bit of fumbling with the remote turned on the closed captions, and she settled, resting her bottle on her chest.

She caught herself slipping her hand under her shirt and the waistband of her pajama pants, fingers tracing the long crevices in her skin that ran from just below her rib cage down to her vulva. It occurred to her that she looked like a dude adjusting himself, but no matter how funny the mental image, she couldn't bring herself to laugh.
Chapter Notes

1) Aconite is also known as wolfsbane, which is highly poisonous and has traditionally been used by farmers and ranchers to kill wolves.

2) Even though Castiel uses Catholic prayers, he's actually Lutheran, specifically Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, mainly because I was raised ELCA and I'm more familiar with it. Lutheranism and Catholicism are very similar (Martin Luther never intended to create a separate denomination, it just kinda happened when the Church excommunicated him), so I feel okay with him using Catholic prayers. I imagine Cas to share my habit of picking up religious pamphlets, booklets, and prayer cards wherever he happens to find them, anyway. Cas's prayer is one my mom (who was raised Catholic) taught me when I was a kid.

3) I'm obviously adjusting wolf and human physiology...wolves can go for weeks without eating, so Kevin's physical condition may be less severe here than it would be if he were 100% human. Similarly for diet...everything these people eat are just humanized versions of foods that wolves like, which include various types of meat, fruit, and eggs. (I asked my dad, who is a cook, about how he would fancy up scrambled eggs, so if you ever wanna try them with garlic salt and Tabasco sauce, you've got a chef's endorsement.)

4) Ganked Lenore and Eli to be Jess's parents just 'cause.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Who in blazing blue hell decided it was a good idea for the food to show up at 6:30 in the God damn morning?"

Much like his daughter, Bobby was touchy about his sleep. The approximately 3 1/2 hours that had been afforded to them after coming home, getting settled, discussing the night's events, and then trying to sleep peacefully before being rudely awakened by their alarm clock, had been inadequate to say the least.

"It was a joint decision between you and me, Robert Steven Harvelle, and don't you go invoking the powers of darkness before coffee."

"Was I drunk?" Bobby held out his hand, taking the mug Ellen offered him. With 15 minutes until the catering was due to arrive, he sat at a table for two in the Roadhouse, nursing his I-need-to-go-back-to-bed headache.

"No, you knew that we are feeding a huge crowd for two days and getting this place decorated, and that we needed as much time as possible to get that done and not be running around all crazy-like." Ellen sat down, warming her hands with her own cup of coffee.

"Well why didn't we make the kids come out and do this?"

"You're really gonna make the bride and groom take care of this themselves?"
"They got siblings. Hell, Dean was up."

"Yes, but we're hosting the wedding, not them. Now quit'cher bitchin', old man. It ain't becoming."

"Oh, I'm an old man now?"

"The first of our kids is getting married. That officially makes us both old."

"So can I start introducing you as "my old lady" now?"

"Sure, if you ever stop valuing your balls." Ellen nonchalantly shut her eyes as she raised her coffee cup to her lips, but they opened again when the sound of the kitchen phone ringing drifted through the swinging doors.

"Who the hell is calling?" Bobby muttered.

"Could be the catering people," Ellen said, listening for the second ring. It didn't come, and her expression suddenly changed. Bobby noticed his wife's face go from jovial to grave, and set his coffee down.

After about ten seconds, the phone rang again.

"Aw, hell," Bobby said, standing up.

Ellen put down her cup and untangled her fingers from the handle as Bobby turned and hurried towards the kitchen; she followed after him in time for him to get to the phone first, pick it up, and say, "The Roadhouse is closed today for personal reasons."

"Hello, Bobby."

"It is balls o'clock in the morning. How did you know we'd be here?" From the corner of his eye Bobby saw Ellen lean against the wall, crossing her arms.

"I didn't. Figured I'd try, though. Is it just you there?"

"Me and Ellen. We're waiting on the catering and decorator. The boys are still at the house."

"I see." There was a long pause. "How is Sam?"

"Good. Rarin' to go, as of last night. He's been wanting this for a long time."

"I know. You told me. And Dean? How's he doing?"

"He's good, too. He's holdin' the collars for them today, him and Jo, did I tell you that last time?"

"You didn't. That's good. That's nice. I can see him doing that for Sam." Another pause. "How is...how's the bride? Anything new?"

"You know, when I told you the cops had nothing to go on, I meant the cops had nothing to go on. If and when that changes, God help me, you'll be the first to know."

"Thank you."

Bobby shifted from one foot to the other. "Where are you now?"

"Minnesota."
'Is he really in Minnesota or is he just saying that so we don't tell him his worthless ass should be here today?' Ellen grumbled loudly.

"Tell your wife I'm really in Minnesota and no, I shouldn't."

"Gimme that." Ellen snatched the phone out of Bobby's hand. "John Winchester, you miserable bastard. Your son is getting married today, the least you could do is call the house and say "congratulations" directly to him."

"Somehow I don't think he'd appreciate that much, Ellen. Unless you've been telling him about these calls."

"Well if you've got no intention of being in the boys' lives ever again then stop calling us. Let us think that you're dead, too."

"Ellen..."

"No, I've had it, John. Either care about your kids all the time or don't, but stop calling us whenever you feel guilty. You don't get to be their father when it's convenient."

"Go to hell, Ellen."

"Yeah, well hold the door for me, John."

Bobby grabbed the phone right before Ellen slammed the phone down. "John?" It was hard to ignore Ellen's death glare, but he managed it. "You still there?"

"Yes." The snarl in John's voice had not yet subsided.

"Look, John, you know I agree with Ellen. It ain't doing right by the boys for us to keep you a secret."

"Don't you lecture me about doing right by the boys, Bobby Harvelle. I already did. I let you keep them, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. Only 'cause CPS played the middle man, but you did, and maybe you'd like to follow up on that?"

"Christ, Bobby, I can't do this right now. Kate is..."

"What?" John was silent. "John? What happened to Kate?"

"She's dead, Bobby. That's why I'm in Minnesota. I'm arranging a funeral."

"Shit." Bobby glanced at Ellen; her angry features softened enough to allow a sympathetic grimace. "When? How?"

"A few days ago. Autopsy said she had aconite in her system. Apparent suicide. They think she..."couldn't bear the loss of her son any longer"."

"Jesus. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't a suicide."

"How do you know?"
"Because I haven't stopped looking for him."

"John--"

"I told Kate that I would stop looking for Adam when I found him. Dead or alive."

"It's been four years, John. I don't think there is any finding someone when that much time has passed."

"Adam might have escaped and can't get home by himself. Or I might still find him. Kate didn't kill herself, Bobby. She was murdered. They're after me, and they got to her."

"Christ, John."

"Ellen still want me to come back? Or would you guys rather avoid me bringing this down on your heads?" When he was answered with Bobby's stony silence, he continued. "Look, Bobby, I tried that "normal life" stuff twice and it didn't work either time. Sammy'll probably have better luck with that, you got him young enough. Dean too. But for fuck's sake, Bobby, both of my wives have been murdered. All three of my boys have gone missing; one of 'em still is. How the hell can I...shit."

"Honey, lemme have the phone again," Ellen said, obviously still upset but gentler now; Bobby passed it to her wordlessly. "Now you listen to me, and you listen good, John Winchester. Mary and Kate are dead. I ain't saying you have to give up on Adam, but you have to accept that he might be dead, too. Normal life might not have sat well on you, but chasing these fuckers all over creation suits you even less. Now you cocked it up royally with Sam and Dean but they are the only family you know that you have left. And you are running out of time to pop out of the woodwork and still have them forgive you."

"I don't want their forgiveness, Ellen."

"John--"

"I have to go now, Ellen. Thanks for taking my call."

"Dammit John don't you dare hang up on me--! Oh, that son of a bitch!" Ellen very nearly threw the phone across the room; she settled for smashing it back into the cradle.

"See, nothing good comes out of getting up this early," Bobby said, massaging his temples and then dragging his fingers down his face to rub under his eyes.

"Jesus, people're going to be here in five minutes." Ellen tussled her hair, not sure if she was aiding or undoing the one-two brush she had given it this morning, and shut her eyes. "All right. I'm calming down. Ain't gonna take this out on the caterers; not their fault John Winchester's a bastard. Clear blue ocean, clear blue ocean..." She opened them again after a minute, looking at Bobby; something in his demeanor caught her attention. "What is it?"

"Huh?"

"You're thinking about something."

"It's nothing."

"No, it's something. Tell me."
"Well, I, uh..." Bobby cleared his throat; Ellen's inquisitive gaze could be quite intimidating. "It occurred to me that...after the wedding, but before he leaves...we might want to ask Castiel if he's ever...heard anything. About Adam."

Ellen tilted her head back, pressing one side of her lips together, and exhaling through the other side.

"If he has, you're gonna be the one calling John."

"Wakey wakey--oops, sorry."

Not wanting to trap himself in a precarious position in regard to his sprained ankle by kneeling, Castiel had elected to sit up for prayer. It felt like a hands-clasped-together morning, rather than a hands-raised-to-shoulder-height-on-either-side morning; his head was bowed either way. He had just opened his mouth to begin reciting when Dean, who clearly didn't expect him to be awake, opened his door.

"I'll just, uh, close the door, leave you to it," Dean continued, ducking out of the room.

"No, no, it's fine," Castiel said, and Dean slowed down, hanging out awkwardly in the negative space created when he neglected to shut the door fully.

Castiel was unused to rushing through prayer or feeling self-conscious about it, but Dean's unexpected appearance made him forget the words that were supposed to be spilling from his mouth right about now, and feel a bit silly about the formality of them, besides. A quick second's worth of rushed thought told him that resorting to a childhood nursery prayer was probably his best bet for minimizing awkwardness.

"Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here," Castiel said quietly, equally wanting and not wanting Dean to hear him, "ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen."

Castiel reached for his crutches, which he had propped against the window, and hauled himself to his feet. "Ready now," he called superfluously, as Dean was already creaking the door open slowly.

"Sorry 'bout that."

"No worries. You're not familiar with my morning routine." Castiel arranged himself on his crutches. "I have four younger siblings, in any case, so I'm used to getting interrupted."

"Don't you have, like, a million siblings?"

Ah, the joys of having parents and siblings with their fingers in various high-profile industrial and political pies. "I have nine brothers, three sisters, two brothers-in-law, five sisters-in-law, fifteen nephews, and five nieces. Plus my parents."

"Damn." Dean held open the door for Castiel to hobble through. "That's some pack. You like having that much family?"

"It has its ups and downs."
"I guess, but..."

"Mmm?"

"I dunno, at least you're never lonely?"

On the couch, Jo shifted and gave a slight moan. About a half hour after she turned on the TV she had drifted into sleep, thankfully putting her only half-empty bottle on the floor before she did so. When Dean came down that morning with Bobby and Ellen he found her with her shirt pushed halfway up her stomach, fingers still resting on her surgery scars; he had gone back upstairs and came down with her comforter, which was now pulled up all the way to her chin.

"I'm certainly never alone."

"Man, you don't like your family much, do you?"

"No, it's not that," Castiel said, following Dean across the living room to the kitchen. "I do love my family. It's just...it's chaotic, even in small doses. Even at Joshua's church, it's hard to get a moment to yourself."

Dean held the kitchen door open for Castiel. "Guess I could see how that'd get annoying."

"You'd prefer a large family, I take it?"

"Maybe not a small country like your family, but yeah, I guess I wouldn't mind an extra family member or two."

Kevin sat at the kitchen table, toying with the apple slices on his plate before him. He had been fed by his captors, but the quantity and quality of the food had diminished as he refused to assist them, and since he had gone three days with no nourishment at all, Amelia had elected to be extra careful, instructing the Harvelles to feed him only fruit for the first day and see how he reacted.

"Oh, um, good morning," Kevin said, putting down the slice he had been about to put in his mouth.

"Good morning, Kevin," Castiel said, maneuvering himself into sitting at the table while Dean made for the stove. "Did you sleep all right?"

"Yeah. I mean...better than...before." Kevin fidgeted with his plate. "I, um, I never thanked you."

"You don't have to."

"But I..."

"Kevin." Castiel reached across the table, taking Kevin's wrist lightly in hand; Kevin ducked his head for a second and when he looked up, found something indescribable in Castiel's eyes. "It was my honor."

Dean didn't have to turn around to know see Kevin's expression reveal that he had become suddenly, achingly overwhelmed, but he did turn around to try to give the kid a moment to recover.

"How'd you like your eggs, Cas?"

"I'm not picky." Castiel released Kevin's wrist and leaned back in his seat, while Kevin tried to fight back the shine that had taken over his eyes.

"Then scrambled's okay?"
"Absolutely."

Dean opened the fridge, flipped open the taking out the carton of eggs. "Now gentlemen," Dean said, as he set the carton down and got to work, "I have gathered you here this morning because Aunt Ellen informs me that both of you will be at the wedding this afternoon--Cas are you coming to the ceremony? Or just the reception?"

"I'd like to be at the ceremony." It seemed rude not to be. "I can manage it. As I said before, this isn't my first time with crutches."

"All right, awesome. Okay, so, both of you are going to the wedding, and neither of you have clothes. We need to fix that asap, so after we eat I'm taking you out shopping. Now don't get your panties in a bunch." He waved his hand in preemptive dismissal. "This wedding is not super-formal and neither of you are paying for the new threads, anyway. We just think you should have something to get you through the next two days before your families come to get you."

Kevin had gone home from the hospital in a set of scrubs donated by the hospital gift shop, having given his clothes over to be examined for more physical evidence. The part of him where his mother's influence was strong tempted him to protest that Dean shouldn't, but the teenage part of him told him to just accept when someone wanted to give him something for free. This left Castiel to object to Dean's plan alone.

"If you point me to your laundry room, I could clean my clothes from yesterday."

"Nope. You're not wearing the same outfit three days in a row." Dean stabbed at the yolks and whites in his frying pan with a spatula. "Unfortunately that stuff I thought I could lend you for today? I never noticed the huge bleach stains. If you want to stay here 'cause of your foot, I can try to eyeball clothes that'll fit you."

"But--"

He was interrupted by the kitchen door opening and an extremely groggy Charlie swaying her way inside.

"'Morning..." Charlie scratched the side of her head, worsening her already mussed hairdo, and squinted her eyes against the light in the kitchen. "Food..."

"You want eggs or are you making your own breakfast, Char?" Dean asked.

"...Food..."

"All right, I'll make you something," Dean said with a mock-sigh, opening up a cabinet and retrieving some garlic salt; Charlie grunted appreciatively in response and grabbed a free chair. "I'm taking Kevin and maybe Cas to get clothes, you wanna come with?"

That seemed to wake her up a bit. "Ooh, yes, please!"

"See Cas? Now Charlie wants to help get clothes for you. Are you gonna take that away from her?" Dean opened the fridge, emerging with a bottle of Tabasco. "I warn you, she learned puppy eyes from Sammy and he's the master."

Castiel glanced over at Charlie; her sleepy eyes had indeed gone wide. For added effect the corners of her mouth turned dramatically down in a pout, and she raised her wrists to just under her chin, pointing her fingers down in her best imitation of a dog begging.
Castiel had been a brother and an uncle long enough to know when he was not going to win.

"All right," he mumbled. "Thank you."

"Awesome. So you coming with, or staying here?"

"Coming with."

He thought he detected a hint of triumph in the way Dean transferred some eggs, seasoned and laden with sauce, onto a plate and set them in front of Castiel.

"Cool."

There were a lot of reasons why Sam had asked Jess to approve an outdoor wedding in public space the day before Thanksgiving. He had to remind himself of all of them as he watched Jess catch--peacefully, thank God--the last vestiges of sleep available to her.

She had crawled back into bed maybe an hour after she had fallen out of it, kissing his face and pressing herself tightly against him, letting herself be held for the rest of the night. She hadn't been completely rigid, he noticed, but she wasn't completely relaxed, either.

Maybe this really was a bad idea, no matter what Dean said. As much time and thought and heart Sam had invested in the wedding, with the actual event looming just hours ahead of them, the whole thing seemed like a theatre major's first attempt at writing a play they were sure would be ground-breaking and world-changing.

Seriously, who wanted their ceremony to be a sociopolitical statement in front of God and everybody, to be followed by a celibate wedding night?

Jess stirred, and Sam jerked his head back to avoid being hit in the face when she turned over onto her stomach. She pulled herself back onto her knees, stretching her arms out in front of her and resting her head on the mattress, before leaning forward, her spine arching concave to the bed as she stretched her legs.

"Good morning, puppy girl," Sam said, allowing himself a genuine smile through his self-deprecating thoughts.

"'Morning, baby," Jess breathed back, turning to allow herself to sit on the mattress. "I'm sorry about last night."

Sam let his head drop onto the pillow, reaching up to stroke her arm. "It's okay, babe." He watched her toss her head back, throwing her curls away from her face...futilely, as they fell right back once she had leveled her head again.

"Do you still want to get married today?"

It took them both aback when the exact same words, with the exact same inflection, fell out of their mouths at the exact same time.

"...Are you telepathic now too, and forgot to tell me?" Jess asked, poking Sam in the nose. She squeaked when Sam snapped her finger into his mouth, holding it firmly but gently between his
teeth, and giggled when he released a small growl, like a puppy at play. "Give me that back..."

"No," Sam grunted out.

"I will smack you with a newspaper if you don't let go."

"No. Mine. Grr."

Jess laughed, wedging her other hand in Sam's mouth and pressing his teeth apart, freeing her finger only to run it, and its compatriots, down his face. Sam caught her wrist, pressing the heel of her palm to his lips.

"Yes, yours," she whispered, watching him with soft eyes.

Sam propped himself up on his elbow, reaching up to rest his hand around her neck, rubbing his thumb back and forth across the line that divided soft skin from the leathery version of the same, imagining the stiff but soft material he could place there today, if she hadn't changed her mind. "My wife?"

Jess blinked, slowly, before her pressed-together lips stretched out in a smile and she nodded, small but quick. "Mmhmm. Your bride. If you want me."

Sam sat up fully, letting go of her wrist to stroke her arm, moving up from her neck to gently run his thumb over her lips and cheekbones. She shut her eyes lightly, allowing herself to soak in the touches as much as the sunlight streaming in the window, which made her unprepared for when both his hands suddenly grabbed her sides, dragged her down onto the mattress, and began tickling her.

"Sam!" Her entreaties for him to stop were lost amidst small shrieks and giggles, both her own and his. He caught her flailing hands and pinned them down on either side of her head, and gave themselves just enough time to catch their breaths--not enough time for Jess's thoughts to turn away from him--before leaning down and kissing her.

"I will always want you." He set a light kiss on her forehead, before flicking his tongue over the tip of her nose. "I'd be so lost without you."

"Oh, hush..."

He silenced her with another kiss, to her mouth this time. "You're my treasure." Another one, to her neck. "My sunshine." He nuzzled her there gently, keeping mindful of her pulse. "I'm happy just having you around. You know that, right?"

Jess made a self-conscious, but affirming, noise. Sam grinned down at her, released her wrists, and flopped back onto the bed beside her. A few tugs let her know she was being asked to get on top of him, and she obliged, sitting on his hips.

"You know, though," Jess said, settling her hands on his shoulders as if anchoring herself; Sam reached up, holding her upper arms, as if helping. "I'm not happy just...being around."

Sam looked up at her, meeting her embarrassed and determined gaze. The night's conversation and Jess's disappearance flitted through his mind, but Jess seemed resolved to look past the latter, and dwelling on the former now seemed useless. He slid his hands down her arms, taking her hands and lifting them off his shoulders, kissing the back of one and then the other.

"I will make you happy, Jess."
Jo woke up when she heard Dean and Charlie quibbling over if Charlie was allowed to take Sam's place in the front seat of the Impala, instead of being squished in the backseat with Castiel and Kevin. The presence of guests kept her from yelling at Charlie for waking her in the middle of the night, and she instead elected to doze until the four had made their way out of the house. About a half hour after that she decided that it really was time to get up, and after getting dressed and scarfing down some breakfast, she wandered over to the Roadhouse to see if she could help.

"MostPlaters," Jo said, reading off the side of the catering van. "I'm guessing they were cheapest."

"You would be correct, JoJo." The clanging of glass rattling caught her attention, and she turned around to see Garth carrying a cardboard box. "They were also the only ones that would allow me to supply the booze."

"Blueberry vodka, nice," Jo said, glancing inside as he came to stand on her left.

"Ah-ah, no touchy!" Garth pulled the box away.

"I wasn't gonna," Jess pouted.

"Can't be too safe. This is my gift to the bride and groom, so they get first crack at it." A figure moved around the side of the van, at the corner of Garth's eye. "Hey, where you want me to put this?"

"Not the caterer, man," Ash said, coming fully into view.

"I am also not the caterer," the man said, and Jo turned her head to see Eli Moore--Jessica's father--bringing up Ash's rear.

"I'm just joshin' ya," Garth said jovially; he was met with a barely-concealed sneer. "What are you doing here, slummin' it with the working class?"

"He's probably looking for Frankenstein," Jo said, her voice as chilly as the November air surrounding them.

Eli turned to her with a stunned look on his face; Jo crossed her arms, her eyes narrowed.

"Can I speak to you privately?" Eli said, tightly.

"No no no," Jo said, crossing her arms. "I think our family has a right to know what kind of people our in-laws are. Especially when they are the kind of people who say truly shitty things about their kids."

"Whatever you heard about this, you are taking out of context."

"I think it's hard to take "My daughter is a hideous freak of nature that no one will ever love" out of context."

"Shut up!" Eli hissed, taking a step forward.
"Whoa there!" Garth said, sliding in between Jo and Eli, holding the case of vodka out as an additional buffer. "Let's stay calm. Peaceful. This is a wedding. We're supposed to be happy."

Eli growled, taking his step back. As skinny and small as Garth was in human form, he was still an Alpha, and while a fellow Alpha like Eli might be able to take him on, with two Betas backing Garth up, Eli was outclassed.

"Right. It's a wedding. But this man here," Jo gestured to Eli, "seems to think Jess is too revolting to be a bride."

"You are misinformed," Eli ground out. "I am happy that my daughter is getting married today. I am relieved."

"Glad you're finally getting rid of her, huh?"

"Now," Ash interjected before Eli could retort, "I'm not a father, so maybe I don't know really know my ass from my opinions, but. I thought dads generally don't feel relieved when their baby girls get married?"

"That's right, you aren't a father," Eli said. "And you certainly aren't the father of an Omega."

"What's her type got to do with it?" Jo said through clenched teeth, defiantly.

"Don't play stupid, Joanna Harvelle. Look at your oldest brother. An Omega. He works hard. He isn't stupid. He isn't bad-looking. But he's nearly 25 years old with no mate and no prospects. And he's a man. Jess has it even harder. Her best bet for having a future was always to be pretty enough to attract some fool Alpha or Beta who was okay with a smaller family. That fire could have ruined everything for her."

Ash caught Jo's arm, fearing that at any second she might launch forward and tear into Eli's face with her nails--perhaps not bothering to take wolf form first. After a second Ash realized that Jo was struck stationary, as if crushed underneath the quintessence of the type of thinking of which lesser forms would send her into a rage.

"Well I'm sure glad that my big brother found your daughter to be suitably fuckable," Jo finally managed to say. "Don't you worry. Jess is gonna have a bright future here as Sam's blow-up doll."

"Don't talk about my daughter using those words," Eli said, in a low voice. "I'm not the one who set up the world as it is."

"No, but you certainly are helping to keep it going."

"Eli? Is everything okay? Did you find Jess?"

The group turned their heads to varying degrees to see Lenore approaching from the other side of the van. Eli turned his head again, and the righteous anger that occupied his eyes was now tinged with resentment and mild disgust. It suddenly struck Jo--and Garth and Ash--that both Jess's parents were Alphas, and from Eli's expression, the Omega ancestors that gave Jess her genetic type must have belonged to Lenore.

"Everything's fine, Lenore," Eli said tightly. "I was just having a conversation with our in-laws."

"Oh, hello, good morning," Lenore said warmly, coming to a stop beside her husband. "Have you seen Jess? Her grandmother wants her to try on her dress to make sure it doesn't need any last-second alterations."
"She's, uh, probably at the house," Ash said. "Here, I'll walk you over, door might be locked."

"Thanks." Lenore glanced at her husband, covertly assessing him. "Dear, why don't you head back home and make sure the kids are getting ready?"


The Moore home was on the other side of the Harvelle territory line; Sam and Jess had met due to this close proximity. It wasn't necessary that Eli take wolf form to return home--he hadn't needed it to get to the Roadhouse--but he seemed to burst violently through his transformation, and took off without acknowledging the need for proper good-byes.

"Ignore him," Lenore said, her body slumping a bit. "He has a wild hair up his ass today. He's had a wild hair up his ass for the past ten years. I swear if it weren't for the kids..." She paused, looking solemn, before flashing a grin, making it ambiguous as to how serious she was. "Anyway. How are you guys?"

"Pretty good, all things considered," Ash said. "How about you, Mother of the Bride?"

"I'm all right. Excited. Nervous."

"What's nervous about?"

"Well, I don't want anything to go wrong. Jess should have a perfect day. I don't want anyone ruining her wedding for her."

"What, like her dad?" Jo asked, sullenly.

Lenore laughed. "You people don't hold back, do you?"

"We try not to."

"So I see," Lenore said, still laughing. "And no, he's going to behave. I'll make sure he doesn't do something stupid. And I'm not worried about Sam, either. That paranoia is strictly reserved for my husband." Lenore had refused to sleep in the same bed as Eli for three days after the "Frankenstein" comment.

"Then who ya worried about?" Ash asked.

"I'll give you a hint."

"Awesome, I love guessing games." Ash grinned at Lenore.

"Her name starts with "R" and ends with "uby Masters"."

The smile instantly dropped off Ash's face. "Ah."

"Yeah."

"Don't worry, we have people on Masters detail," Garth said. "Ash is ready to bodyslam any she-devil that thinks she can interrupt today's proceedings."

"Thank you, Ash, you're too chivalrous," Lenore said, with a curtsy. "Anyway. I should collect my daughter now."

"If you'll follow me," Ash said, with a sweeping bow that pointed him in the direction of the house;
Lenore inclined her head genteelly. "See you guys in a few."

"Yeah, see ya," Jo said, still sullen; Garth gave more friendly parting words as Ash led Lenore away.

"Well? Is this acceptable?"

Dean had been watching Charlie go in and out of the dressing room several times; her dress for the wedding was hanging up in her closet, but trying on new clothes—well, "new" clothes, considering Dean had taken them to Blake Charity Resale Shop—was like crack to her. Kevin was less enthused but rather diligent, picking out—with Charlie's assistance, when she wasn't distracted—old but still nice-looking jeans and button-downs that he slung over his arm once he determined they fit, heading off to locate shoes, socks, and underwear (the latter of which were thankfully donated unused and still in the package). Dean hadn't forgotten that Castiel was with them, but despite being on crutches, the man had moved so unobtrusively among the clothes racks—as silently and vigilantly as Dean imagined he'd be on a rescue mission—that it was easy to let his more flamboyant little sister take over his attention.

No more. Castiel stood before him, crutches anchored to the floor and spread a little to invite Dean's opinion, clad in black suit pants with matching jacket, a white button-down, and a black tie. The essence of plainness and safe fashion choices.

Dean only just barely realized that his legs, which had been situated apart from each other in a comfortable stance, suddenly closed as he sat up a little straighter.

"Good. I mean, those're fine, Cas. You'll fit right in."

"Lucky that someone donated this whole set together," Castiel said, loosening the collar a little bit.

"Yeah, you strike gold here sometimes. Told you that Jess found her dress here, right? 40 bucks, only worn once." Dean watched Castiel bob his head and adjust his outfit a bit more, getting it situated to his frame. "So, yeah. I think that'll be good. So just find yourself something for the day after..."

"There's a pair of jeans in there that I tried on and they fit," Castiel said, waving his hand in the direction of his stall. "I figured I would wear this shirt with them tomorrow, if that's acceptable to you."

"Yeah, okay, that works." Dean had the sudden urge to stand up. "Sounds like a plan. You ready to go?"

"Well I have to get back into my own clothes first," Castiel said. "And I should probably pick out underwear, like Kevin is doing."

"Oh, right. Yeah. Sure. Good idea."

Castiel disappeared back into his stall and Dean slumped back into his seat. Fuck, had he been babbling? Dean Harvelle did not babble. Dean made other people babble. Dean should be making Cas babble, not the other way around...

Whoa.
Castiel reappeared within two minutes--the man got shit done, even with a handicap--with the new clothes folded neatly and pressed against his side, under one of his arms. Dean stood up, hoping his expression was neutral. "Here, gimme those, I'll hang onto them while you find...your...stuff."

"Thank you." Dean's hands brushed Castiel's chest as he took the clothes, leaving an uncomfortable but not altogether unpleasant sensation in Dean's stomach.

Oh fuck no. Dean was not getting a crush on this guy.

Castiel headed towards where Kevin was still absentmindedly perusing underclothes and Dean wandered off. Near the registers was a table of old-fashioned kitchenware that people had donated when they failed to go at a yard sale; Dean had picked up a four-person set as a wedding gift for Sam and Jess several weeks ago, and curiosity brought him back to see if the same type of selection was there.

It was. People didn't seem to buy china from thrift stores. Stupid, Dean thought. You wanted your china to look old-fashioned. What had Jess called it? A "claim to antiquity" or something like that? You wanted something that you'd only bring out for holidays and special occasions to look like it had seen a lot of life, like it carried family and tradition and auld lang syne with it.

Dean smiled, transferring the clothes to one hand so he could inelegantly but gently trace one of the plates with the other. He liked this pattern, a cottage scene done entirely in brown, the picture taking up nearly the entire plate so that it could be mistaken for geometric patterns until one looked closer. It was clever, but it was also warm. Homey. He could see Ben eating off this plate on Christmas.

Today was just the day for unbidden thoughts, wasn't it.

"I like that one, too."

Dean looked up, dropping his hand away. Castiel was standing next to him, assessing the plate, a package of underclothes clutched between his hand and a bar on his crutches.

"Are you looking for your brother? Or yourself?"

"Neither. Just looking." Dean attempted to nonchalantly take the package from Castiel; it probably didn't work. "You ready?"

"Yes. Well, actually. I was thinking it would behoove me to get a wedding gift for Sam and Jess. And for your parents, for hosting me."

"You don't have to."

"But I want to. And since I'm an adult and I have cash, you can't stop me."

"Okay, moneybags," Dean said, laughing. "Do what you want."

"I shall." Castiel stood in self-assured silence for all of five seconds. "What should I get them?"

Dean snorted. "Ah...tell you what, we'll stop at the liquor store on the way back and you can get my folks something fancy from there. As for Sam'n'Jess...here." Dean transferred the package to under his arm, alongside the clothes, and picked up a set of salt and pepper shakers shaped like domestic dogs. "I don't think anyone thought to get them those. Even if they already got some, you can never have too many, anyway. Set for the table, set for the stove, set for special occasions..."
"You speak like a cook," Castiel said with a small smile, recalling breakfast.

"That's 'cause I am. Monday through Friday I'm the Chef Supervisor at the Roadhouse."

"Impressive," Castiel said, and though Dean was wont to take such praise as sarcastic, there was no hint of irony in Castiel's voice.

"It's just a fancy term for Head Burger-Flipper," Dean said, shrugging.

"Hey, Dean?"

Dean turned his head to see Charlie approaching him from the other side. "What's up? You and the rugrat ready to head out?"

"Yeah, but. There's a problem."

"What is it?"

Charlie pointed out the storefront window. Dean turned his whole body to see what she was indicating, and once his brain caught up with his eyes he released a snarl.

"Hold these." He pushed the clothes, package, and shakers into Charlie's hands without looking at her, power-walking towards the door.

"I'll be right back, Charlie," Castiel said suddenly, hurrying after Dean, leaving a very befuddled Charlie in his wake.

"Meg, I fucking told you, if you touch my car and I will bite off your damn hands."

"Not touching," Meg said in singsong, holding her hands up by her shoulders; she was standing on the sidewalk a few inches away from the Impala. "I was just wandering by and noticed that it was parked here, and I thought to myself, now what is Dean Harvelle doing at Blake's on the day of his darling baby brother's wedding?"

"None of your fucking business, that's what, and if you or Ruby or anyone in your fucking family show your faces at Sam's wedding I will rip them off and feed them to you."

"Keep barking, bitch; it's adorable."

"Meg?"

Dean whipped around as Meg leaned over to see around him; he was unable to see her eyes blink and widen slightly.

"Uncle Cas?"

"What are you doing here?" Castiel asked, coming to a stop beside Dean; it had been some feat pushing the door open with his shoulder without tripping over the threshold.

"Wait, "uncle"?" Dean interjected, straightening himself out.

"She's one of my brother's daughters," Castiel explained quietly, before facing her fully. "What are you doing in Lawrence, Meg?"

"I...live...here?" Meg raised her chin and cocked her head to the side. "With the rest of my family? For, like, the last four years? How do you not know this?"
"Your father hasn't really spoken to me in awhile," Castiel muttered.

"Huh." Meg crossed her arms. "I guess the Shurley Grapevine isn't what it used to be. What are you doing in Lawrence? What the hell happened to your foot?"

"I had an...incident. And I'm here on business," Castiel said, hoping that her observation about the extended family's weakened propensity for gossip was correct. "I got into town yesterday."

"Uh-huh." Meg raised her eyebrow. "And you know Dean Harvelle...how exactly?"

"I ate at the Roadhouse last night."

"And, what, now you're his date to his brother's wedding?"

"Hey, I think that's also something that's none of your God damn business, Meg," Dean cut in.

"My, what aggression, on such a blessed day! Is that any way for a sweet little Omega to behave?"

"Meg," Castiel hissed.

"Fine, fine, Uncle Castiel, I'll be good," Meg said, clasping her palms together in the imitation of a supplicant angel. "Anyway, I have to bounce, but it was glorious seeing you. I'll let my folks know you say hi. Toodles."

"Wait, Meg--" But she was already flouncing away down the street, her hair swinging back and forth as she rocked her head dramatically from side to side.

"Is she seriously your friggin' niece?" Dean asked.

"Yes."

"How?"

"Her father is seventeen years older than me. I was six when Meg was born. So she feels more like my cousin, but she is, in fact, my niece."

"And you really had no idea she was living here?"

"Lucifer--her father--is...he does what he wants. No matter what the family thinks. I'd be surprised if he's spoken to any of Set 2 in the past four years."

"Cas, I'm missing the in-joke, here."

"The five oldest of my siblings--Michael, Lucifer, Gabriel, Metatron, and Naomi--" he ticked off the names by drumming his fingers against his crutches, "are from my father's first marriage. They're Set 1. Set 2 is the rest of us--Anna, Zachariah, Joshua, me, Uriel, Balthazar, Rachel, and Samandriel--from my father's second marriage. There's 24 years between Michael and Samandriel, and a 7-year gap between Naomi and Anna. Throw the in-laws and the kids into the mix, and you can imagine that some of us are closer than others. The only time all or most of us are in the same house at the same time is Christmas, so you're only as up-to-date as the person you end up talking to. And all of us think that you've already spoken to somebody else about what's going on with them."

"Ah, yeah, I see how that works."

"May I ask how you know Meg?"
"She was in Jo's year at school. They weren't friends, I'll put it that way." Dean looked like he wanted to say more, but instead he shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away. "Sorry for slagging your niece."

"Honestly, Dean," Castiel sighed, "knowing her, I'm sure she's earned whatever bad feelings you have towards her."

"Wow, burn."

"You're forgetting, I used to be Meg's baby-sitter. So despite my...filial piety towards her...I know what she's like."

Dean snorted. "Not that she'd let you forget it."

"Don't go out of your way to..."slag" her in front of me, though," Castiel said, sternly. "She's still my niece."

"Okay, okay, got it," Dean said, trying to stifle a laugh; Castiel's sternness was somewhat undercut by his uncomfortable use of slang. "All right. We wasted enough time. Better go collect the kids and pay for our shit. Unless..."

"What?"

Dean gestured in the direction Meg had sauntered off. "You wanna go chase her down and meet up with your family."

"I doubt I could catch up with her now, or that Lucifer would be pleased to see me show up unannounced, for that matter," Castiel said dryly. "Besides, like Meg said...I'm your date."

It was brazen, and forward, and Castiel could hardly believe he'd said it, but how adorable Dean's "stricken" face looked, and how Dean didn't exactly refute the claim, made him glad he took the risk.

Chapter End Notes

5) Where are the rest of the angels, you ask? Cast as various in-laws, nieces, and nephews. Not sure if we're going to meet all of them, but they'll at least get name-dropped.

I think you can tell which parts of this chapter were harder to write than others. Also, portions of it were re-written at the last minute because I totally forgot halfway through that Cas is on crutches. ;;>.

This won't be the last time Castiel is surprised by how the Harvelles already know some of his relatives, btw...
I ganked Ezra Moore from 7x12 to be Jess's grandmother because they share a last name. Also took Madison and Glen (from 2x17) and Kate (from 8x4) to be Jess's siblings because they are werewolves with no canonical last names, if I recall correctly. Since Alphas are the prolific breeders in this universe, I thought it'd be weird for Jess to not have siblings.

Lilies-of-the-valley are poisonous to humans, but wolves are known to eat the berries, so in this world it's like eating hot sauce or a lot of jalapenos; you gotta have the stomach for it, and it can burn your tongue pretty bad, but they're edible.

Development in werewolves follows a strict schedule: women begin heat during the Third Quarter phase of the moon of the month they turn 17. Heat lasts from the start of the Third Quarter, and ends with the New Moon. (For November of 2013, that means "Heat Week" lasts from 11/25 until 12/2). Men begin to develop sexual attraction on their 17th birthday. Because they're werewolves and it's magic, that's why.

"All right, babygirl," Lenore said, ceasing to fuss with the skirt of Jess's gown and stepping back. "Looks like the dress is ready."

Jess had been on board with a November wedding partially because of the fact that it gave her an excuse to wear a high-collared, long-sleeved dress. It gave her a little twinge of guilt that she had chosen what she did...Sam had told her over and over to not feel like she had to cover up; that the whole point of the ceremony was to be as public as possible. But he had been equally vehement that she wear what she was comfortable with, so she tried not to feel too bad about it.

It wasn't like she was hiding her face, anyway, and that was just as telltale as anything.

"I did good work on it, didn't I?" Ezra said, with a proud smirk. "Fixed that sucker right up for you."

"Yes you did, Grandma," Jess said with a giggle.

"That's why they used to pay me the big bucks. You're gonna knock Mr. Harvelle on his ass, darlin'."

"Ezra, Kate is filming this," Lenore chided her mother-in-law gently, sending a furtive glance to her 11-year-old youngest, who was busy recording the entire conversation on her camera.

"What? She's probably gonna have a thing for a Harvelle when she grows up, anyway. It's a proud family tradition."

"Creeping on Sam's brother is not a proud family tradition, Grandma," Madison piped up.

"You hush your mouth, young lady. Better to be a cougar than a homewrecker."
"Let it go, Grandma!" Madison shot back, her face burning at the memory of her first heat earlier this year and the unfortunate attraction it had brought with it. "I only liked Sam for, like, three days!"

"Ladies, can we please not do this?" Lenore said, loudly. "It's gonna upset Jess."

"Calm down, Lenore," Ezra said. "Me and Madison are only teasing each other. And Jess is made of stronger stuff than to be bothered by us foolin'. Isn't that right, Jessica?"

"She is very strong," Lenore said, drawing Jess's hair back and up, away from her face. Jess's hair had escaped the fire relatively unscathed; the hairline on one side had been partially singed, but the fire had been put out before the rest of her hair could go up in flames. "She is the strongest woman in the whole world," she continued, pressing her elbows against Jess's arms in the closest approximation of a hug she could muster with her hands full. "But she deserves a nice day. A nice wedding to a nice man, with her nice family and friends supporting her. So hush up, all of you."

"You look pretty, Jessie," Kate helpfully supplied.

"Thank you, Kit-Kat."

"Thanks, Katie," Jess added; Kate grinned under the praise and flopped onto the bed, aiming for a different camera angle.

Jess's room was not particularly nice. The fire had gutted it, destroying basically all her belongings and leaving the walls irrevocably blackened. After the safety inspector confirmed that the room was not about to collapse into the first floor, Eli and Lenore had gone about starting to restore the room, putting in a bed and an old dresser and covering the walls with primer. Before Jess could settle on a color, though, Sam had proposed, and all efforts to provide Jess with a living space were redirected to the Roadhouse apartment.

Jess didn't like to sleep here or get dressed in here or even look inside the room from the hallway. Even with the window permanently latched closed and covered with heavy, dark curtains, sometimes when she turned her head too quickly, Jess thought she could see the shape of a man crawling in through it. But it had the most open space for five women to cram themselves into and not get interrupted by a father, brother, or any other visiting relatives walking through, and Jess figured she could try to not let the place intimidate her one last time.

"Almost done..." Lenore adjusted the last bobby pin. "Maddy, hand me that?" Madison dutifully handed over a white, gauzy ribbon that Lenore wrapped around the base of the bun she had just created out of Jess's hair. "There we go. Turn around, babygirl."

Jess did as commanded, to face the full-length mirror Lenore had dragged from her bedroom to Jess's.

"Well? What do you think?"

"I look..." She was buried in white, like a statue blanketed in fresh snowfall; everything but her face, the upper half of her neck, and her hands were completely covered up.

"Wait, you need your flowers!" Kate said, rushing across the room to the dresser where Jess had set her bouquet, and bringing it back to her with all the pride of a puppy playing fetch.

The lilies-of-the-valley almost disappeared against the gown. Lenore had asked her if she was sure that white-on-white was a good idea, especially when the flowers in question were expensive off-season ones, but Jess had been adamant. On the practical side she could give them to Dean and Jo
to eat when the wedding was over. But more than that, these flowers were supposed to represent a return to happiness, and Jess wanted them as a good omen.

"Feeling bridal yet, sweetheart?" Lenore asked.

"I feel..." Jess inhaled deeply and shifted, listening to the fabric ruffle, and lifted a hand to gently toy with the flower buds. Purity was supposed to be another meaning of theirs. "Clean."

She missed the confused look shared by her sisters, as well as the troubled one exchanged between her mother and grandmother.

Pastor Jim Murphy met the Winchesters when Dean was a fetus and Jim had just become a chaplain at the University of Kansas not long after his ordination. Mary Winchester was, at the time, an adjunct professor at the School of Law and spearheading the campaign to attract more Omega applicants to the university. An Omega himself, Jim appreciated her efforts, as well as her fascination with the field of angelology. Their shared interests netted him an invitation to dinner, where he found Mary's husband John to be another excellent acquaintance after he wound up doing an oil change on the pastor's car after dessert.

The Winchesters never properly belonged to a church, and so Jim had christened both Dean and Sam in a non-denominational university chapel. It was through this that he met Ellen Harvelle and Bobby Singer, whom Mary and John had picked to serve as the boys' godparents. In fact, Sam's christening took place only several minutes before Ellen and Bobby's wedding--they had decided that both were to be small affairs with only the necessary amount of witnesses present, so why not?

Six months after that Jim led Mary's funeral service. A handful of her ashes sat in a tin on a shelf in his office.

After John Winchester left Lawrence, taking the boys with him, Jim had tried valiantly to keep in contact, and was rewarded by sporadic letters, mostly penned by John, with occasional postscripts from Dean, who still remembered the pastor despite leaving Lawrence as a four-year-old. Sam had written him once, at the age of five, thanking him for "krisening me and beeing my mom and dad's freind". The letters came with less and less frequency as the years went by, and for a year before Ellen and Bobby went to New York to bring Dean and Sam back to Lawrence, Jim had heard nothing from them at all.

Oddly enough, while Dean had greeted him warmly upon his homecoming, it was Sam who sought Jim's company more often. Sam had known nothing of life but travel, and wanted stories of the settled life John and Mary had once led. Jim told Sam about Mary's interest in angels, and taught Sam some of the prayers directed to angels that he had taught Mary. He told Sam about Mary's work at the university, and wasn't surprised when Sam eventually decided to pursue law at the same school. And when Sam and Jess started officially dating three years ago, he jokingly asked what day he should keep open for their wedding.

"How does the day before Thanksgiving sound?"

"Sam...are you sure?" Jim had asked. Sam had called him from the hospital after Jess had just undergone a skin graft, hiding out in the dining area of the otherwise closed cafeteria.

"I have never been more sure of anything."

"Sam, I'm not questioning the fact that you two are a great couple, so don't take it that way. But I
don't want to let the fire scare you into rushing into marriage--"

"It isn't. I mean, yes, the fire has sped things up a bit, but I was going to ask her soon anyway."

"Okay, so, you've asked her and she's obviously said yes. That's great. What's wrong with a long engagement?"

"I realize that this is going to sound strange, but I...I want to give Jess something solid. A long engagement is...a little too wishy-washy for what's happening."

"And what makes you say that?"

"Do you know what's going on right now? What people are saying?"

The rape and attempted immolation of a hometown girl and college coed did not go unnoticed by the local or university media. And while some of the buzz was in support of Jess--fundraising to pay for her procedures, signal boosting the vague police description of her attacker in the hopes that he'd be found soon--the rest of it had gotten ugly rather quickly.

A big deal was made of the fact that Jess had been in heat at the time of the attack and had purposely left her window open. The story evolved from her simply leaving her window partway up, to waiting by it (in some folk retellings, she had been leaning out of it); from hoping her longtime boyfriend would notice her on his post-dinner walk, to deliberately trying to attract any man who happened to pass her house. She had been dumb enough to leave herself vulnerable (and they want more Omegas to go to school, tch), or she had been slutty enough to cheat on Sam (hell, maybe the guy set her on fire when he found out she had a boyfriend, that whore); either way she deserved what happened to her.

And oh, poor Sam, who had invested years into a relationship to get this awful return. Even if she hadn't been trying to cheat on him, there was nothing much left to recommend her anymore. The physician who told Jess that having children would no longer only be difficult, but actively dangerous, quietly advised her to "let Sam go" and find an Omega male who wouldn't have been expecting children by her anyway.

Their classmates gossiped that Sam might be leaving on his own soon in any case. Jess wasn't exactly pretty anymore. And Sam was the most Alpha-like Beta ever; he was probably secretly the possessive type. Sure he was supportive now, but eventually he was going to start resenting the I was here graffiti that Jess's attacker had burned onto her. No, he’d find someone else—another Beta this time, or maybe even an Alpha; Ruby Masters liked him—who was just as beautiful as Jess had been, who actually had a good chance of giving him children, who didn’t have permanent marks on her body broadcasting that someone else had fucked her.

"I do know," Jim had said quietly.

"People say these things to her face. Her own fucking--excuse me--her own stupid father thinks I'm going to ditch her as soon as I can do it without looking like a giant douche. Again, excuse me."

"You're excused."

"Jess is...she's in the Recovery Room right now, I just came from there. First thing she did when she saw me was grab me and say "Please don't leave me". And she just kept saying that, over and over. "Please don't leave me". "Please don't leave me". God, I just...I know, I realize she's loopy from the anesthesia but I can't let her go the next however many years thinking that one day I'm just gonna walk out on her. She doesn't deserve that."
"I understand."

"I want to give her security. I want to give her a wedding collar and a piece of paper from the state that says I'd need a lawyer and lots of money if I ever decided to leave her. That's why people get married anyway, right?"

Jim had had to laugh at that. "It's a blunt way of putting it, but that does seem accurate."

So he penned "Sam&Jess's Wedding @ 1" into his calendar and had them sit through the premarital counseling session he vetted all his couples with, during which Sam had asked him if changes to the legal ceremony format were allowed.

"As of right now you can't take away from how things are done," Jim said, with a sympathetic grimace at the displeased face Sam pulled. "But you are allowed to make additions."

Several Beta and Omegas had complained over the years that the format of a legal wedding—the different vows used for different types, and the way wedding collars were exchanged—was archaic and discriminatory. They had been met with public and political dismissal, and nothing changed on the legal front, so more progressive-minded people were finding loopholes to equalize their ceremonies.

"Then that's what we'll do."

Jim offered the chapel for Sam and Jess's use, but Sam turned it down.

"This is too big," Sam had said. "This isn't even strictly about me and Jess anymore. Those things people have said...I mean, how many Omegas go through something similar?"

"More than you'd want to believe. But, Jess," and Jim turned to her, who had been rather quiet the whole time, "do you want to make an example out of your wedding?"

"I think Sam's right," Jess had said, taking her fiance's hand. "Things are...things are never going to change, for us or anyone, if we keep to ourselves."

Thus some strings were pulled and extra money paid to secure the steps of the courthouse. It wasn't the main entrance, of course, but the side entrance they were using was still visible from the street. It being the day before a holiday, they were sure to have an audience of people out running last-minute errands. Jess was still something of a minor celebrity; the wedding could possibly attract media attention. At the very least one of their friends had offered to do a write-up of their effort in the school newspaper.

"And I suppose, even if this goes nowhere, you'll have made your intentions clear to Jess," Jim had said to Sam, when Jess excused herself to use the bathroom.

So now, the day before Thanksgiving, Jim waited in his office for the correct time to start getting ready to head over to the courthouse.

"Your boy's making an old man stand out in the cold, Mary," he grumbled good-naturedly, in the direction of his old friend's urn. "For all his high-minded ideals, a little common courtesy wouldn't be amiss."

The silence that answered him seemed oddly warm and companionable. He smiled weakly, rocking his desk chair, but the smile faded as he regarded the urn.

Jess had come so close to losing her life the same way Mary had. It was painfully surreal when
"the fire" began referring to Jess's attack instead of Mary's death.

"Is there any rhyme or reason to this, Mary?" Jim asked. "Why both of you...?"

This time the silence was cold, and sad.

"Here, Kevin. Make yourself useful."

Kevin managed to hold out his hands in time for Dean to place a folding chair in them.

"Please and thank you."

"I feel like such a bum," Castiel said. He was occupying the very first chair Dean had set up, watching as the Harvelles and early-arriving guests got to work making the courthouse lawn look like an actual venue.

"Nah, don't worry about it," Dean said, dragging some folding chairs across the dirt and fitting them under his arm as he surveyed the landscape. "In two weeks I'll call you and you'll have to come running from wherever the hell you are to do some big favor for us, and we'll be square. Okay?"

"All right. You'll need my number first."

Be cool, Dean. "Gimme it before you leave." Nailed it. Dean almost awarded himself a proud smirk.

"Don't let me forget."

Dean decked himself in the chin as he hoisted the chairs into his arms, causing a semi-loud clang when they also collided with his necklace.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine. Fine." Pride goeth before a fall. Dean set the chairs down again, lifting the amulet up in front of his eyes to make sure he hadn't damaged it. The thing was hollowed out brass, so a small encounter like that wouldn't have harmed it, but Dean had a mortal fear of the lid popping open and the contents spilling out.

"What is that?"

"It's uh....it's an urn."

Castiel blinked.

"My mom died when I was four. My brother got me this one year for Christmas; I keep some of her ashes in it."

"Oh. I see." Castiel hesitated for a moment while Dean readjusted the chairs. "I'm sorry about your mother."

Dean shrugged, tightly. "S'okay. Well, no, it's not, but. Thanks. Be right back."
He walked away for a few minutes, going up the courthouse steps to assess the lawn from that vantage, and then bark out directions to Charlie, Kevin, and Jo on the placement and rearrangement of a row. He and Jo shouted back and forth at each other over one particular chair, until Jo unceremoniously ended the exchange by tapping her fingers to her mouth, turning around, and tapping the same fingers against her bottom.

"Real mature, Joanna Beth!"

"Lalalalala I can't hear you!"

"Tell me your younger siblings are girls," Dean grumbled as he made his way back to Castiel. "I can't be the only person with pain-in-the-ass little sisters."

"One of them is," Castiel said. "Her name is Rachel. But she's a lot more...strictlaced, than Jo. I can't picture Rachel doing something like that. My brother Balthazar on the other hand...I think it's more a "younger sibling" thing than strictly a "younger sister" thing."

Dean's response was preempted by a young voice chanting "Deandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandeandea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taking his tail gently captive between his teeth; once the hold was secure, he walked himself around in a rotation, veering off course a bit, but only slightly.

"Impressive," Castiel said, and just as before Dean tried and failed to find a hint of sarcasm in the man's voice.

"Come on, Ben, turn back," Lisa scolded, and Ben let go of his tail in order to obey.

"I taught myself to do that," Ben said proudly, once he resumed human form. "I can get dizzy and fall down if I spin too fast, so I make sure to walk slow."

"That's a very wise thing to do, Ben. You seem like you're very smart."

"He is," Dean said, looking and sounding just as pleased with Ben as Ben was. "Smartest kid in all three Kindergarten classes, right, Ben?"

"Right, Dean."

"Okay, okay, don't make his head swell," Lisa said, but her smirk showed her to be equal parts exasperated with and proud of her son. "Is his dad here? I have to talk to him."

"Benny's not here yet; I asked him to go do me a favor. Why, what's up?"

"It's his turn to take Ben for Thanksgiving this year. I wanted to give him Ben's overnight bag before I forget and drive off with it."

"Oh, okay." Dean paused. "Where are you headed?"

"My sister's, same as last year. Folks still aren't talking to me, so. Just me and her family."

"You know, you could--"

"She's already made up a room for me. And she just had a baby, so I really want to go spend some time with them. I'm planning on staying with her through the weekend."

"Oh." The trained eye could spot the crestfallen look just before it disappeared into neutrality. "All right."

"Thank you, though, for offering."

"Mom," Ben said, tugging on Lisa's coat.

"Yes baby?"

"Can I have your phone? I wanna play Fruit Ninja."

"Um...yeah, sure." Lisa pulled her purse off her shoulder and dug through it, handing her phone over to her son once she found it. "Why don't you sit down, honey? Mommy's gonna see if she can help Dean and everyone set up."

"Okay." Ben was already engrossed in starting up the game, using his peripheral vision to take the seat next to Castiel's.

"Cas, you don't mind keeping an eye on him, do you?" Dean asked, a little strain of guilt seeping into his voice and expression.
"Oh, no, don't worry about that," Lisa said, turning to Castiel. "You don't have to. Especially since..." Her eyes drifted down to the crutches he had laid on the grass in front of him.

"No, it's fine," Castiel said, glancing up at Dean with a stare so comprehending that Dean had to look away. "One of my nieces is his age, so I'm used to this age group. I don't mind watching him."

"Are you sure? I mean, he's not going to run off or anything, but..."

Castiel waved his hand. "It's no trouble. I've just been sitting here distracting Dean all day, anyway. This'll make me feel like I'm doing something."

Lisa gave an uncertain half-smile. "If you're sure..." Castiel gave one slow, firm nod. "All right. Just...he's just going to sit there and play his game, so just yell for me if he suddenly feels sick or he has to use the bathroom or something."

"Understood."

"Thanks, Cas," Dean said, still not looking directly at Castiel. "Lise, here, you can help me convince Jo that I'm right about something..."

Lisa followed Dean as he wandered over to Jo, glancing back to make sure her son had settled into his game--he had--and maybe to see if Castiel was watching them go; he was. Their gazes caught each other; Castiel raised his eyebrows, and Lisa bit her lip, confirming his suspicion.

Dean was definitely in love with Lisa.

Lisa definitely did not love him back.

And all three of them knew it.

When someone rang the doorbell Sam spent a few seconds being confused. People had been coming in and out of the house all day searching for this or that; it took him a moment to remember Ellen coming into the room, kissing his cheek, and saying that everything was set up for the reception and that she and Bobby would meet him at the courthouse. She had hugged him for a beat longer than she normally did, he recalled.

The doorbell rang again and Sam figured it was one of the guests either dropping off a gift or confused about where they should be heading. He and Dean had extended maternal family in Michigan, who they hadn't remembered meeting at Mary's funeral and about whom John had never volunteered any information. They had discovered the Campbells after coming back to Lawrence and digging through the personal effects that had survived the fire only to be shut up in storage; Sam had initiated contact, and now that branch of the family was coming to Lawrence for the first time in twenty years.

"I'm coming!" Sam yelled as the doorbell rang for a third time when he was halfway down the stairs; he jumped the last handful of steps with the aid of the wall and the banister and jogged to the door, fumbling with the deadbolt and regular lock, and throwing the door open once he was finished.

"About time."

"Ruby." Sam shrunk back, visibly wilting under her stare.
"One and only."

"Why are you here?"

"Don't pull any punches now," Ruby laughed. "I just wanted to see you one last time as a single man."

"Ruby, I have never once been single for the entire time you've known me."

"I seem to recall a period of time when you and Miss Jessica were on the outs..."

"That was three years ago, Ruby." Three years ago when Jess reached maturity four-months-and-change before Sam did, and the sudden onset of sexual feelings for someone who couldn't immediately reciprocate them had forced Sam and Jess to limit their interactions with each other until Sam's birthday. When Sam started hanging out with his Physics lab partner Ruby, who was 15 days younger than him, dyed her hair every other week, and sometimes got her little sister Meg to quit picking on Jo for five minutes "as a special favor to you, Sam".

"Time away from each other means nothing in matters of the heart," Ruby said, her eyes impossibly wide, hands clasped dramatically to her sternum.

"Knock it off."

"Ouch." Ruby attempted to step inside the house, but was forced to retract her step when Sam didn't budge. "You really gonna do me like this, Sammy?"

"You shouldn't be here. Please leave."

"Jeez, you'd think we hated each other."

"I'm not exactly fond of you anymore, Ruby," Sam said, a sardonic laugh pushing its way out of his throat. "Beyond that, I have to go. I'm getting married today. And you were not invited. So please. Leave."

"Yeah, I'm fully aware of your impending wedding to the Crispy Critter--"

Sam moved at her so suddenly that, even though in retrospect it hurt her pride as an Alpha to be so startled, Ruby very nearly stumbled back.

"You will never refer to Jess like that again."

"Yes, sir," Ruby shot back, recovering enough to straighten herself out and dig her hand into her pocket. "Sorry, I didn't mean to insult your precious puppy love. In fact, I came to give you a wedding present."

She punctuated her statement by lifting a plastic bag to her eye level, slightly brandishing it so it caught the light filtering through the front porch and made itself explicitly recognizable.

"Get out."

"Jeez, manners, Sammy."

"Get out. Now."

"All right, fine, if you're going to be so rude. I'll just leave this right here." She stretched out her hand to place it on the windowsill nearest the front door.
"You will not leave it anywhere." Sam caught her arm, bringing it back against her side. "You will take it and get the hell out."

"Don't make me fight you, Sammy. I will win."

"Don't make us call the cops, Ruby; I'm pretty sure we'll win then."

Neither Ruby nor Sam had noticed the scent of the person approaching the porch until the man spoke, his hand descending heavily on Ruby's shoulder.

"Or suppose we leave the cops out of it, even," Benny drawled, his fingers pressing tightly into Ruby's skin as he angled himself to her side so that she could see him. "Now Sam and I both are all gussied up already for the wedding, but rest assured, Missy, I've got no problem taking up for him if he doesn't want to get dirty."

A small but audible growl spilled out of Ruby's throat and she yanked herself out of Benny's grip, taking a step back so she could glare at both of them.

"'Course, there's always option number three, which is you run along home and nobody's day gets ruined."

Ruby inhaled and exhaled an angry rush of air through her nose. Though she was confident in her ability to take on Sam, he was the strongest Beta she knew, and teamed up with another Alpha, specifically an Alpha who might be able to beat her by himself...seriously, fuck Meg for refusing to come out with her. Who gave a shit if their uncle was around?

"Fine." In one last attempt to gain control of the situation, Ruby threw the bag down; it slid across the wood to Sam's feet. "Enjoy eating barbeque tonight, Sam."

Benny put his hand out, stopping Sam from lunging forward. "That's enough. Go blight your own God damn doorstep, Ruby. Won't ask you again."

Ruby sneered at him, throwing her hands up in a parody of surrender, and backed away, only turning around when she felt the start of the porch steps under her heel. Benny and Sam watched her descend the stairs with a skip and then stroll away, her shoulders nonetheless defensively hunched.

"What are you doing here?" Sam asked quietly, once Ruby had disappeared from sight.

"Your brother called," Benny said, turning back to Sam. "Said he saw Meg Masters while he was out. Asked me to come over whenever I could and make sure her sister wasn't sniffing around, causing trouble."

"He didn't mention Meg to me when he came back."

"Didn't want to upset you without reason, if Ruby kept her distance."

"I see." It would have been nice to be warned, but Sam decided to let that go. "Thanks for coming."

"It wasn't no problem. Now." Benny crouched down, picking up the bag Ruby had thrown. "What's this that she was trying to force on you?"

Sam didn't answer, nor did he have to once Benny got a good look at the object in his hand.

"Shit, Sam," Benny said, his already quiet voice slipping lower. "When did you get mixed up with
"I'm not mixed up in it," Sam said quickly. "I just...back when I first met Ruby, she...I haven't touched the stuff in three years, Benny, I swear. I don't want to. Ruby just..."

Benny recalled a time three years ago when Dean told him that Sam was going away to spend the summer with their maternal grandparents; the memory was dim because Dean had supplied no details and Benny hadn't thought to press for them. Dean had only since told Benny that Ruby was hung up on Sam and hostile to Jess, nothing more.

"I am going to hang onto this," Benny said, holding it up before pocketing it. "And give it to Sheriff Mills when I get the chance."

"It might be fake, if she left it here," Sam said. "She probably just came here to mess with me."

"Still. Might be something. At the very least, hopefully a police presence will scare her into leaving you and your lady be."

The weak smile returned. "I don't think anything can scare Ruby."

"Well now, you and I together just did, didn't we?"

Sam snorted. "I guess so."

"Also, Sam, if you're lying to me about not being hooked on demonblood..."

"You'll kick my ass?"

"Worse. I'll tell your brother."

Sam had to laugh. The nervous energy that had sustained him through the confrontation with Ruby left him, making him lean against the door jamb. "Remind me why I ever didn't like you, Benny?"

"'Cause I was the big bad Alpha asshole preying on your big bro, seducing him into a life of danger and debauchery. We all grew out of it, don't worry about it." Benny stretched. "So. You ready to go and get hitched now, little brother?"

"Yeah." Sam tensed against the door jamb and straightened up, shaking himself as if to rid the feel of Ruby's presence from his skin. "Definitely."

Chapter End Notes

I totally meant to do Sam and Jess's wedding this time around, but the chapter was getting long, and I think the event deserves to head its own chapter. Please look forward to it next time around~
Do and Don't

Chapter Notes

It's my headcanon that Dean's middle name is Troy, as an homage to Deanna Troi from Star Trek: The Next Generation. Hence I gave Sam the middle name Jacob, after Jake Sisko from Star Trek: Deep Space Nine. According to this fic's timeline, the boys were born in time to be named after these characters (Dean in 1989, Sam in 1993), so I guess I made John and Mary Winchester into Trekkies.

Jim's address is adapted from "On Your Wedding Day" by Nita Penfold; Jess's speech is adapted from "The Wedding Vow" by Sharon Olds.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

re: vows/collars

Dear Mr. Harvelle,

Thank you for contacting the Department of Vital Statistics and congratulations on your upcoming wedding. As you may be aware, the state of Kansas has set standardized vows that must be exchanged in the presence of at least two witnesses in order for a marriage to be considered legally binding. These vows are classified as "higher type", "lower type", and "same type".

Based on the information provided in your e-mail, it is my understanding that you are a Beta male marrying an Omega female. In these circumstances, you will be using the "higher type" vows while your fiancee will be using the "lower type" vows. For your convenience, I have attached the text of these vows.

At this time you cannot eliminate any portion of either of the vows and have your marriage be considered valid. Some rewording is permissible, though please be aware that all rewording must be approved by the department prior to the date of your ceremony. You may also make additional vows during your wedding; however, these additions will not be considered legally binding, and the breaking thereof cannot be used as grounds for divorce should you ever wish to dissolve the union.

Your other question pertained to the exchange of collars. Given your type differences, it is only necessary that you place a wedding collar on your fiancee. However, many Betas and Alphas in similar situations also choose to collar themselves during or after their ceremony; this is perfectly permissible under the law.

Best regards,
C. L. Atropos
Dept. of Vital Statistics

Vows

Please be advised that the partner using the "higher type" vows must speak first.

Higher Type
I, [name of higher type partner], take you, [name of lower type partner], to be my mate. I will love you, provide for you, and protect you, for all the days of my life.

**Lower Type**

I, [name of lower type partner], agree to be your mate. I will love you, honor you, and obey you, for all the days of my life.

It is a lie to think that when getting married, the bridal couple can think of nothing but each other.

Sam was aware of Dean elbowing him lightly in the side, not so much to distract him but to keep his brain from short-circuiting when the Moore family's car pulled up to the curb and, after the rest of her family had clambered out and arranged themselves, Jess's door opened and she was assisted out of the vehicle. He was aware of Jo grinning and making an approving noise; of Bobby and Ellen shifting their weight behind him; of his weird youngest sister and her new friend sitting on a branch of a tree on the courthouse lawn instead of on chairs because...he didn't actually know why; they'd been sitting there since before he and Benny had arrived at the site and he was too distracted to question it.

For her part, Jess was aware of her stone-faced brother Glen not so much escorting as dragging their grandmother to their chairs; of the back of Kate and Madison's heads as they processed before her, scattering flower petals; of the warmth of Lenore's arm linked through her right one and the burn of Eli's linked through her left; and especially of the flash of cameras and the glow of camera phones, which seemed to be everywhere. Jo had texted her, just before they left the house, that people had noticed them setting up for a wedding and begun milling about to watch them; word got out that this was Sam and Jess's--yes, *that* Jess--wedding, and more people were showing up. The area was by no means swamped, but the amount of strangers present necessitated Jess to steel herself up enough to keep walking despite how weak her legs suddenly felt.

And she did also notice Charlie and Kevin sitting in a tree. It seemed like the kind of kooky thing Charlie would suggest and that someone in Kevin's situation might go along with. As far as coping mechanisms went at least it was better than drinking, which was what Jess had almost started to do, before Sam reminded her of a red powdery substance he'd once mixed in with his drinks that had sent him away from her for three months. She'd taken up baking instead. For the sense of control, and for the irony.

"Who gives this woman in marriage?" Pastor Jim's voice rang out, pulling Jess out of her reverie; the buzzing in the crowd mitigated into a dull roar.

"We do," Eli and Lenore said, not quite simultaneously.

"Who permits this marriage to take place?"

"I do," Ellen said, her hand drifting over to take her husband's wrist.

"I do too," Bobby said, once Ellen's hold was secure, and a very soft murmur of surprise rippled through some the self-invited guests.

Sam and Jess caught each other's eyes for the first time, exchanging nervous smiles. The first innovation to the ceremony--a Beta giving permission equally to an Alpha--had gone over all right. Jim had assured them other people in their situation did that too, in private ceremonies; perhaps a
lot of the spectators had seen it happen before.

Lenore squeezed her daughter's arm and kissed her cheek. Eli did as well, on Jess's other side, and a rush of mingled lingering anger and semi-reluctant forgiveness spiked in her blood. Her parents released her arms, drifting back into the seats reserved for them, and Sam stepped down a few of the stairs, holding out his hand to her. She found she needed the support; the stairs seemed so much narrower and spaced further apart now that she was taking them slower, more purposefully than when she had gone to apply for their license.

"Dearly beloved," Pastor Jim began, and Sam and Jess's hands were warm and sweaty and heavy in each other's, and holy shit, suddenly it was happening and, unbidden, Jess's eyes welled up. "We are gathered together in the sight of God--and half of Lawrence--" there was a rumble of nervous giggles, "to witness the joining of Samuel Jacob Harvelle and Jessica Lee Moore in marriage. As it is a tad chilly, it is my intention to keep this short," more laughter, "but I'm an old man, and we old men love to ramble, so please permit me. I had the great honor of knowing Sam's birth parents, and being the one to christen their two sons. I am immeasurably happy and proud to be presiding over Sam's wedding to this lovely young woman standing next to him, the pleasure of whose company I have been blessed to have over the past several years."

Jess blushed, ducking her head; Sam squeezed her hand.

"As many of you are aware, Sam and Jess have not had an easy journey," Jim continued. "The world we inhabit is imperfect. It is rife with injustice, and inequality, and can be unrelentingly harsh and cruel, especially to the most vulnerable. This is something we all, and Sam and Jess in particular, are intimately familiar with."

Sam quickly prayed that Jim would provide no details--the last thing they needed today was an enumeration of every bad thing to happen to either of them--and his request was answered.

"For a marriage to be successful in an imperfect world, it has to be enough that two people have found one another," Jim said instead, turning his focus completely on the couple. "It has to be enough that you are willing to share your life's journey, to cherish one another at the end of the day. You must maintain enough challenge and contentment to keep you satisfied; enough strength to hold to one another and yet not clutch too hard; enough endurance to grow together and support each other; enough peace to balance the heartache and sorrow. I say this not as a lecture, but merely as a reminder, should over the course of your many years together you find yourself growing complacent. The same type of passion and commitment you two have invested in your courtship and in this wedding is what will sustain you through marriage. If there is one thing I wish for you, it is that you find limitless joy in the maintaining of your relationship, for all the rest of your lives."

The binder in which Jim had placed the script for the ceremony closed. "And now, before Sam and Jess exchange vows, the bride has something she would like to say."

Jess turned, catching a glimpse of the stunned look on Sam's face as she did so--she had wanted to surprise him with this, to make him proud, and also not to disappoint him in case she chickened out. "Katie!" she whispered loudly, and her little sister leaned forward, exchanging a small index card for Jess's bouquet.

As soon as the piece of paper was in her fingers, the trembling in her legs spread up to her arms and hands. There were people in this crowd--from total strangers to acquaintances to members of her own family--that honestly thought she had no right to be here, that had had the words "slut" and "dumb bitch" and "shouldn't expect him to stick around" cross their minds or leave their mouths when confronted with her. The collective gaze of all those people was suddenly heavy upon her and she felt herself shaking in the effort to not crumple up underneath it.
Sam stretched forward slightly, running his hands up her arms and gently pulling her back into facing him fully. One of his hands dropped, but the other slid down her arm and into her hand, clutching it tightly as if doing so could transfer some confidence to her. She gripped it back, a gesture of gratitude, and while she kept her head down, eyes glued to the card, she opened her mouth.

"Sam," she said, trying to be loud enough for everyone to hear, trying not to rush but neither to linger too long lest the shaking have a chance to travel into her voice box, "in truth, we are already married. We were married by our hearts and minds a long time ago. But now we stand in history, and what we have said to each other before, in private, we now say publicly. We stand, holding each other by the hand," and she raised their clasped hands as if to show the spectators that she spoke true, "but I also stand as if alone. I feel as if...as if I have come to you," she shut her eyes against the words, "congenitally unworthy, to beg for a promise, a sweetness stolen from life's sourness."

Sam settled his free hand atop Jess's, his palm against her fingers as his thumb stroked the back of her hand, an extra protection against the cameras flashing around them.

"And yet," Jess continued suddenly, her breath nearly catching in her throat, "we have been working toward this moment our whole lives. And now that it is time to speak, you are offering me, no matter what," no matter how many people had called him a bleeding heart or a bitch-whipped idiot for asking her to marry him, no matter what she looked like or what she was capable of doing and giving him, "your life. And all I really have to do here is accept it. To say out loud, in front of everyone, that I accept the gift I long for. So...do I take it? I do. I take as you take. Do I bear this pleasure? I do." Her hand holding the index card dropped to her side, the slip of paper fluttering to the steps as she looked up at Sam, blinking her glittering eyes. "I do."

The air was noisy--saturated with camera clicks and whispers of either approval or disdain--but it seemed suddenly quiet around them, and the loudest thing Jess heard was the rustle of her sleeve as Sam lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it, before mouthing I'm proud of you to her.

"And now," Jim said, after a pause to allow them a moment to soak in what Jess had said, "let us proceed to the vows. Who holds the collars?"

"We do," Dean and Jo said, almost completely in tandem.

"Please present them to the bride and groom."

They did so, Dean winking and Jo grinning their support for their brother and soon-to-be sister-in-law as they pressed the wedding collars into their hands. It was relatively quiet around them...double-collar ceremonies weren't too unusual anymore, as Ms. Atropos had written. The method of exchange they were going to do probably was.

"Sam?" Jim prompted.

Sam opened his mouth, closed it to clear his throat, and then opened it again. "I, Samuel Harvelle, take you, Jessica Moore, to be my mate."

“I, Jessica Moore, agree to be your mate,” Jessica replied.

“I will love you, provide for you, protect you, honor you, and obey you, for all the days of my life." Jess used one hand to pull any wayward tendrils of hair away from her neck as Sam slipped the collar around it. "Never above you, never below you, always beside you,” he said, extra loudly, as he clipped it shut.
"I, Jessica Moore," Jess said immediately after Sam took his hands away, before she could hear if anyone disapproved of him promising to obey his Omega wife, "take you, Samuel Harvelle, to be my mate."

“I, Samuel Harvelle, agree to be your mate.”

“I will love you, provide for you, protect you, honor you, and obey you, for all the days of my life." If anyone, shocked by her promise to protect and provide, still thought she was going to hand Sam's collar to him and let him humor her while retaining his status, they were stunned again when Sam pulled his own shoulder-length hair out of the way and Jess reached out to collar him herself. "Never above you, never below you, always beside you."

Later, in a Letter to the Editor printed in the University of Kansas school paper, someone would call this "a frankly tacky display between an Omega too eager for attention and a Beta too stupid to notice when someone is using him".

Much later, two others--an Omega and an Alpha this time--would model their ceremony after this one.

"By the power vested in me by the State of Kansas and the Lord our God, it is my honor to pronounce you husband and wife."

It wasn’t only to be self-consciously weird that Charlie and Kevin had chosen a tree branch for their seats.

While Dean and Castiel had been off dealing with Meg, Charlie had gotten every bowl of potpourri laying around the thrift store, paid the bewildered cashier three dollars for them, and put the bowls’ contents in her purse. She transferred it to tupperware containers when they stopped back at the house to finish getting themselves together, and after she and Kevin were safely settled onto their perch, she passed two of the containers to Kevin.

Thus when Jim gave his pronouncement, the people seated closest to the tree were treated to a shower of celebratory dried rose petals. Once all attention was on them Charlie tilted her head back and released the best imitation of a howl of joy that she could produce in her human form. After a second of hesitation that was beat out by a thought of “fuck it”, Kevin did the same. Before they set themselves to rights they heard Dean start in, followed by Jo, then Bobby and Ellen and Jess’s sisters all at once, and soon half the congregation had joined the chorus, leaving Sam and Jess to laugh out their amusement and gratitude and the last of their nerves before turning to each other and sealing their union with a kiss.

“Lisa! Lise. Wait up.”

Lisa had been semi-prepared for Dean to track her down after the ceremony, but she still inhaled deeply before turning around. “Hey, Dean.”

Dean slowed from a semi-run to a jog before finally catching up with her and her son. Behind them a huge mass of people were trying to leave the yard, catch up with friends and family in attendance, and congratulate the new couple and their parents.

“Where’re you two headed in such a hurry?”
“Just wanted to escape the crowd before we got crushed in it,” Lisa said, and indeed once Sam and Jess had kissed she had stood up, pulled Ben into her arms, and begun excusing her way past the other, sitting guests.

“I howled too, Dean,” Ben said excitedly. “I howled really loud. Did you hear me?”

“I sure did, buddy,” Dean said, holding up his hand for a high-five, which Ben supplied. “Did your mom howl?”

“A little bit,” Lisa said, as if confessing. “I wasn’t expecting that to happen.”

“None of us were. Charlie’s a nutcase. And now she’s got a little minion to carry out her bidding, so it encourages her.”

“What’s a minion?” Ben piped up.

“It’s, ah…it’s someone who does what you tell them to, Ben.”

“Oh, okay.” Ben processed this information. “Are you a minion, Dean?”

“No,” Dean laughed. “What makes you think that?”

“Well my teacher said that Omegas do what other people tell them to.”

“Your teacher is wrong, Ben,” Dean said, immediately, his amusement vanishing. “And you should tell him that.”

“Dean, please don’t teach him to backtalk his teachers,” Lisa muttered.

“His teacher’s an idiot,” Dean shot back. “Ben, Omegas do what they want just like Alphas do. If anyone tells you different, you set ‘em straight for me, okay?”

“Okay,” Ben said, rapidly losing interest in the conversation and instead looking around at the movement surrounding him. His face lit up, and before Dean or Lisa could ask what tickled him so, he shouted “Daddy!” and tried to stand up against Lisa’s chest, waving his arms. “Daddy! Over here!”

“I see you, Junior, I see you,” Benny said; he was strolling towards them, Andrea trailing behind him. Ben wriggled against his mother, and once Benny and Andrea were close, Lisa handed her son over to his father.

“I howled,” Ben informed him. “Dean heard me. Did you hear me, Daddy?”

“I did indeed, Junior. I think people in China heard you.”

“He hasn’t grasped the concept of an “indoor voice” just yet,” Lisa said, fondly.

“We’ll have to teach him that,” Andrea muttered, somehow both looking directly at and through Lisa.

“Who needs an indoor voice at an outdoor wedding?” Dean asked, seeing Lisa prepare to retort.

Benny swung his son down, so that Ben’s feet dangled to the ground, and then lifted him up, fitting the little boy onto his shoulders. “We’ll work on it over the next few days. If we have the chance, that is,” he looked up at his son, “seeing as I’m planning on taking Junior out camping Friday through Sunday.”
“Really?” Ben hunched over, looking his father in the face upside-down.

“Yep.”

“Benny, it’s November,” Lisa said.

“I know. I want to take him before it gets too cold. We’re not going very far…I figure we’ll set up camp just beyond Garth’s houseboat.” The pond on which Garth lived marked the end of the Harvelle property, the woods behind it being public space. “So we’ll be near civilization if we’re in danger of freezing to death.”

“Can Dean come too?” Ben asked, bouncing on his father’s shoulders.

“If he wants too,” Benny said, looking at Dean.

“We’ll see, Ben,” Dean said. “They might need me at the Roadhouse. But I’ll definitely come out to see you even if I can't stay overnight, okay?”

“You gotta promise,” Ben said, sticking out his fist, pinky uncurled.

“All right, promise,” Dean said, hooking his own small finger around Ben’s and bobbing them up and down.

"Ah, yes, that reminds me," Benny said, looking to Lisa. "Did you bring his bag?"

"Yeah, it's in the car," Lisa said, sliding her purse down her arm and digging through it for her keys.

"Lisa, actually, do you mind if I...talk to you for a few minutes?" Dean asked, like waiting any longer would cause him to lose his nerve.

"Andrea and I'll take Junior to the car to get his things, so you can talk," Benny said, catching the undertone in Dean's voice. He held out his hand for Lisa's keys. "We'll wait there until you're ready, and then we'll head over to the reception all at once, how's that sound?"

"I suppose that's fine," Lisa said, a little coolly, suddenly remembering the many ways Benny and Dean could double-team. She dropped her keys, as hard as gravity would permit, into Benny's hand.

"Thanks. Dean, I want to talk to you, too," Benny said, eying his friend, "but it can wait."

"Okay."

"Darling," Benny addressed his fiancee, draping his arm around the back of Andrea's shoulders; the sour look on her face mellowed a bit at the touch. "See you soon, guys."

"Bye Mom!" Ben leaned over as his father passed Lisa, planting a kiss on his mother's cheek.

"See you soon, baby. Be good for your dad."

"I will. Bye Dean!" Ben added, waving cheerily; Dean waved back as Benny bore his son and fiancee away.

"So what d'you need, Dean?" Lisa asked, adjusting her purse strap, determinedly not looking at him.
"I, ah..." Dean glanced around, taking in the mass of people; his gaze briefly settled on Castiel, waiting patiently for the crowd to thin enough for him to safely stand up, and found himself having to look away quickly. "Come with me real fast?"

"So this is a privacy-needed thing?" Lisa asked halfheartedly, as Dean took hold of her wrist.

"Um...yeah." Dean led them towards the other side of the courthouse, dodging people who called out greeting to them, trying not to notice how Lisa didn't match his eager pace. He let go of her wrist once he pulled them near a set of tall, decorative bushes; he angled them into a difficult-to-observe position, and took an overly-deep breath, as if trying to make his nervousness look masculine. "Look, Lise, I'm just gonna...just gonna cut to the chase, okay?"

"Okay."

"Let's do it."

"I'm sorry? Do what?"

"That." Dean waved his hand in the direction of where they had just come from. "Mate. Pairbond. Form a pack. Whatever you want to call it."

"Dean..."

"I'm not saying we do it right now," Dean interrupted quickly. "But I think it's something we should, you know, consider. For the near-ish future."

"Dean, I don't...I don't think so."

"Why not? What's stopping us? Your dickheaded folks are out of your life. You're free and independent and you can make your own decisions. And you and me were awesome together, remember?"

"We were 17 when we met, Dean. We were kids."

"I'm not that different now than I was then. I mean, I'm not sleeping with Benny any more obviously, but aside from that I'm still pretty much the same guy."

"But I'm not the same woman."

"Either way I still...things haven't changed, Lisa, not for me. You then or you now, I still see myself being with you and being happy, actually freaking happy. And with Ben, now; I mean, I know I'm not his real dad but you see how he is with me. He looks at me like I hung the moon."

"I know," Lisa said in a small voice.

"I know," Lisa said in a small voice.

"I'm just saying. You and me were great once. And you, me, and Ben together? We could be amazing, Lise, if you'd give it a shot."

"Dean, I..." Lisa crossed her arms and looked down, scuffing her foot against the ground. "I just...don't think so."

"Why not?" Dean grabbed her hands, ducking his head under hers so he could look in her face. "What's freaking you out about this?"

"I'm not "freaking out" about this, I just...I just don't think it's as good as you're making it out to be. We were so young when we were together. And now I've got my own kid, and..."
"But why is that a problem?" Dean demanded. "Ben should have two parents living with him, right? You'd never give Benny full custody when Andrea's around, and if you don't want to break her and Benny up..." Dean paused, and then stepped back, letting go of Lisa's hands.

"What?"

"Is that it? You want to be with Benny or something?"

"No, Dean. I don't want to be with Benny," Lisa said, almost laughing at the thought.

"Then what is it?" Dean turned, smacking his hand impotently against a bush; the branches bent and rustled under the impact. "Why don't you want me, Lisa?" he asked, after a long moment of painful quiet.

"You're not safe, Dean," Lisa blurted out, her grimace apologetic but not regretful.

"The hell's that supposed to mean?" Dean asked, anger tempered with genuine bewilderment.

"It means...I don't know what it is, Dean, but danger just seems to...follow you around. I mean, look at how we first met. It wasn't the most peaceful thing, you know? And it's not like people left you alone even after we got together, right? Or after I left? How do you think that'd make me feel, as your mate? As Ben's mother? Never knowing if it's safe for us to go out, if someone's going to try something with you, if Ben's going to get caught up in it."

"Oh, I get it," Dean drawled, his voice as ice, upper lip curling into a sneer. "I see what your issue is."

"Oh, yeah? And what is "my issue", Dean?"

"It's not me that's the problem. You just don't want to be with an Omega."

"Dean!"

"No, I get it. You don't want to be with someone that other people think it's fun to harass. You don't want to be with someone who won't tuck tail and stay home in spite of that."

"You are reckless, Dean!" Lisa shot back, her face burning. "You pick barfights with Alphas! You brought Charlie into your home without even thinking about who might come after her!"

"So you're saying me and Sammy should've just let her starve to death on the street, is that it? She's trying to rob a vending machine with a broken arm, but it'd be the responsible thing to just walk off and let her fend for herself? That's the kind of person you'd rather raise Ben with?"

"I'd rather raise Ben with someone who knows some God damn limits! You couldn't protect a child, Dean; you barely protect yourself. What'll happen if, God forbid, one day I'm not at the house and someone you pissed off a week or five years before shows up at the door?"

"Someone like who?"

"Someone like Alastair, maybe?" Lisa flinched as soon as the words left her mouth; the combination of stunned, incensed, and deeply, instantly wounded on Dean's face told her that the blow she struck had been lower than she had originally thought. Dean opened his mouth, but it took a long time for sound to come out; it seemed that he needed the opening to allow air inside him more than to speak.
“I never should've fucking told you about him,” Dean finally choked out.

“Dean, I’m sorry. I know what…what happened with him was bad.”

“Understatement of the fucking century…”

“And I don’t want to throw it in your face, but that’s my point. You…because you’re an Omega or because of your personality or the way you were raised or whatever…you take so many risks. You…throw yourself towards danger, Dean, if it doesn’t find you first, and you can’t do that when you have a child. I’m sorry. Dean, I…I care about you a lot, still, but Ben comes first. I can’t take the risk that he’s going to get mixed up in one of your battles. I would never forgive myself if he got hurt. You would never forgive yourself.”

Affirmation came in the form of Dean’s sullen silence. Lisa looked down, almost stabbing the dirt with the toe of her shoe.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have accepted your invitation to come today. I shouldn’t have…” she kicked the indent she had made, deepening it, "shouldn't have let you and Ben get close.”

“You didn’t,” Dean spat, as if realizing it for the first time. “Benny’s the one who introduced us. I wouldn't have known the kid exists if Benny hadn't told me.”

"Christ, I shouldn't even have come back to Lawrence,” Lisa said, turning to the side and tilting her head back, shutting her eyes against the sun.

"Well it was nice to find out that you were fucking still alive, so. There was that."

"It wasn't my choice to leave," Lisa snapped. "And I couldn't exactly sit down to write when I was tramping my kid around the entire fucking country."

"Which was something I could've helped you with if you'd bothered to pick up a phone and call me,” Dean shot back.

"I'm not going to argue any more," Lisa said, throwing up her hands. "I'm glad I got to be here to support Sam and Jess, but I really shouldn't have come, and I'm gonna go home before this gets worse."

"I don't think it could. Unless maybe you want to kick me in the balls before you leave."

Lisa almost shot back Don't tempt me but instead made a sound halfway between a snort and a grunt. "Goodbye, Dean."

"Bye."

Dean waited for the scent of her to dwindle into something lingering instead of solidly present, and then gave the chainlink fence running parallel to the bushes a hard kick. The high-pitched rattling rang out louder than he thought it would, which pleased him more than embarrassed him; he kicked it again and a few birds, gathered around the fence to peck at the ground, took to the air in a frightened swoop. He kicked it a third time, and then maybe a few more times; he lost track of his thoughts before he gripped one of the fence posts, squeezing it as if to see if he could bend metal.

"Dean?"

"What?" Dean snapped, whirling around; he wilted, but only slightly, when he saw Castiel, settled on his crutches, standing behind him. "What?" he repeated, aiming for neutral and landing on gruff.
"Kevin and your sister are looking for you," Castiel reported; if he was bothered by Dean's tone he didn't show any sign of it. "People are starting to head out in earnest and they think we should leave now, before traffic gets too bad."

It took Dean a moment to register any complex thoughts that weren't steeped in anger. Castiel, thankfully, made no move to draw him out of his headspace prematurely, waiting for Dean to say "All right" and straighten himself out. "Sounds like a plan."

He resisted the urge to stomp back to where Charlie and Kevin were waiting, knowing he'd get there in less than ten seconds and leave Castiel struggling to keep up if he did so. Listening for the steady click-thump of Castiel using the crutches gave him something to concentrate on, in any case, like a meditation of sorts, so by the time they made it to Charlie and Kevin, the active anger in him had subsided, leaving him only with the desire to get good and drunk at the reception.

Chapter End Notes

Again, this was supposed to be longer, but it felt more appropriate to end it there before we move onto the reception and wedding night.

I actually do want to take this time to self-pimp: I am ordained, and I do have a wedding ministry (http://caitlynmwright.wix.com/revcaitlymwright; one day I will find out how to actually link to things in the comments). So if you or someone you know is getting married in New Jersey (where I live) or New York City (where I am registered) and don't mind that your minister writes Supernatural fanfic, give me a look-see :3
So I did some digging and decided that coolants are essentially hops in pill form. This is not fully confirmed by research, but hops has been used in folk medicine as an anaphrodisiac (there's at least one study that shows some anaphrodisiacal effects in rats) and as a sedative (apparently there are other animal studies supporting this). Coolants are over-the-counter in this world, because the amount is not enough to get you stoned (hops is similar/related to cannabis) or to be as effective/habit-forming as benzodiazepines like xanax. SPOILER: I'm not actually a pharmacologist. Take this with a grain of salt.

Missouri's olfactory dampener looks like a breathe-rite strip, for clarification. They're OTC, too. Also, 20/10 olfaction loosely means her sense of smell is twice as powerful as a normal wolf's.

Since Jess never got a canon major, she's an Art History student, like I was.

Dean's speech is adapted from "The Second Duino Elegy" by Rainer Maria Rilke. I have a slight "Dean recites poetry/literature" kink (thanks to PegasusEridana) but I tried to temper it with his characterization.

Kansas City Kansas Community College is about a half hour from Lawrence, according to Google maps; Dean went there. In this world, since the age of majority is 17 and not 18, everyone starts public school the year they turn 4 and end it the year they turn 16; therefore Charlie is a Freshman in college (since she turned 17 this year); Sam and Jess are Juniors (since they are 20); Kevin is a Freshman in high school (since he is turning 13 this year); and Ben is four years old (since he is in Kindergarten).

I've heard the phrase "First Testament" used to describe what is otherwise known as the Tanakh/Old Testament, and it's my preferred term.

"Kev?"

"What?" Kevin blinked as a hand was suddenly waved in front of his face.

"You okay in there?" Charlie brought her hand down, cocking her head concernedly. Dean and Castiel had already exited the car and were making their way into the Roadhouse; Charlie noticed Kevin had stayed behind when she turned around to talk to him and he wasn't there.

"What? Yeah, why?"

"You got all spacey there for a second. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine, it's..." The ride back to the Roadhouse had been tense; something had pissed Dean off, and his angry silence had been matched by Charlie and Castiel's uncomfortable ones. Kevin
had just come from three days of no sounds besides his labored breathing and the growls of his painfully empty stomach. On the run, at the Roadhouse, in the hospital, even tucked in Charlie's bed (because she didn't quite snore, but she snuffled, and she tossed and turned in her sleep), and of course all throughout today there had been noise, blessed noise, and the sudden absence of it sent an internal shudder all throughout Kevin's body. He'd gripped his seatbelt and stared out the window, trying to have the scenery make up for the silence. It helped, but not much, and he was exceedingly relieved when Dean parked the Impala at the Roadhouse and he could open the door.

Until a wave of strange Alpha scents flooded his nose and temporarily paralyzed him.

Castiel was an Alpha. That nurse who took care of him last night was an Alpha. Jody was an Alpha, and Ellen, and so were some of the other people at the party last night. He'd smelled even more Alphas at the wedding. But he'd been up above them, in a tree, with Charlie and then the ceremony to hold his attention. An oppressively quiet car ride had ripped the sense of activity and its attendant distraction from him.

He felt nauseous.

"It's what, Kev?"

All he'd had today was fruit. Could you even throw up fruit?

"Kevin? Come back to me, Kevin."

"Charlie, is he okay?"

Jody was suddenly standing beside Charlie, and her scent was nearly overpowering in its nearness but at least it was familiar. The rolicking feeling in his gut didn't subside but it felt mildly less intense.

"He just suddenly shut down. I think he's got whiplash."

"Go find Missouri," Jody said, setting on hand on Charlie's shoulder for balance and reaching into the car to unbuckle Kevin's seatbelt; it worried her that he didn't react to her movement. "She might have something on her. Kevin? Kevin, it's Officer Mills."

"I know," Kevin said, his voice oddly wooden. "I can smell you. See you."

"Okay, Kevin," Jody said, calling on the voice she had used when Owen as a four-year-old had climbed up a tree and was too afraid to climb back down, "you don't have to go inside just yet, I know there are a lot of strangers here, but we do need you to get out of the car, okay?"

"Okay," Kevin replied automatically. The normal part of him wanted to be annoyed at being so condescended to, but the hand Jody picked up his own with was too warm and soft for it.

"All right, Kevin, you're doing good," Jody said, as Kevin haltingly got his foot out the door. 
"When you get out of the car we're going to walk over there by those trees, okay?" Kevin twisted, allowing his other foot to touch the ground. "It's not far. You can see everyone but the smell won't be so strong. That sound good to you?"

Kevin was somewhat aware of nodding. Judy gently pulled him forward so that he was standing up, angled him in the line of direction, and delicately rested her hand on his shoulder.

"You're just fine, Kevin, just fine," Jody continued, walking him forward. "You're safe, no one here is going to hurt you. We just need to get you some air and let you adjust. That's it. Just gotta let you
Jody had devolved into cooing soothing sounds, coherent words and phrases only occasionally slipping out, by the time she guided Kevin into sitting on an ancient fallen tree trunk. It didn't take much longer after that for Charlie to reappear, Missouri in tow.

"Well let's just see what's wrong here," Missouri said gently, taking Jody's place of crouching in front of Kevin; Jody stood up to allow her to do so, stepping back a few paces. Missouri glanced at her watch as she took Kevin's wrist in her other hand; her expression was cautiously relieved when she released his arm. "Pulse is okay. Kevin? Can you follow my finger, sugar?" Kevin's eyes flicked to the right and then the left as Missouri dragged her finger through the air. "Good, good." Missouri pressed her palm to Kevin's forehead, and then the back of her hand. "No fever..." She picked up Kevin's hands and brought them up, then released them and squinted, watching his fingers as they trembled in mid-air. "You hungry at all?"

"No," Kevin said, shaking his head. "It's the opposite, actually."

"Stomach's upset?"

"Yeah."

"Mmm. You got a headache?" Kevin responded to the negative again. "Just feeling a little shook up?" Kevin nodded tightly. "All right. I have some coolants on me. Those should help..."

"He's a boy," Jody said, blinking.

"Anyone can use coolants," Missouri said in her nurse voice, opening up her purse and unzipping a compartment. "They're just marketed to women." A bottle of water and a package of coolants were drawn forth, the former handed to Jody. "Here, open this." Jody did so as Missouri punctured the foil that kept the pills encased in plastic with her nail. "Sugar, I don't know how much you know about these," she addressed Kevin again, "but there's a mild sedative in them that'll help you calm down. It might make you a little sleepy but it won't knock you out or make you feel all drugged up. You okay with that?"

Kevin nodded again.

"It'll take a few minutes to kick in," Missouri said, placing two pills in his hand; Jody handed over the bottle of water. "In the meantime you should just sit right here, breathe, and try to stay calm, okay?"

"Do you want us to stay with you?" Jody asked. "Or should we leave...?"

Kevin swallowed the water and pills. "You can stay." He coughed; the pills had been bitter on his tongue and going down his throat. "My mom's an Alpha too," he muttered by way of explanation. Susan hadn't completely managed to take the sense of safety and comfort away from the scent of an Alpha woman.

"Do you want to call her again?"

"Maybe...maybe later," Kevin said. "Don't wanna freak her out if she's driving..."

Jody nodded. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Um...not really," Kevin said, feeling his face grow more and more hot as normalcy settled in.
"You know, this thing on my nose isn't here for fun," Missouri said, rubbing her thumb and index finger on a dark brown patch, the closest match for her skin color available, that spanned the bridge of her nose. "It's for people with oversensitive senses of smell. I could give you one of mine for today if you don't mind having a brown stripe on your nose."

"Maybe." Perhaps because people were beginning to file into the Roadhouse in earnest, the air was clearing.

"Hey, is everything okay?"

Kevin, Missouri, Jody, and Charlie moved their heads, to varying degrees of simultaneity, to see Sam, his arm clasped around Jess's waist, standing a few feet behind them.

"We think so," Charlie said. "Kevin just had a little...um, "episode"."

Sam nodded slowly; Jess grimaced in sympathy. "Anything we can do? I mean, you know it's pretty close quarters in there, and there're more people here now than there were last night..."

"If you want, you can head upstairs," Jess said. "We have the apartment up there. You can crash on the couch until you feel up for joining us."

"Or until they kick you out," Charlie giggled, hoping it would lighten the mood. It didn't quite.

"I don't wanna just...take over your house," Kevin mumbled.

"Nah, don't worry about it," Sam said. "No one else is gonna be up there for hours, anyway."

"We'd rather know that you were upstairs recovering than at the party feeling like crap," Jess added.

The earnestness of their words and expressions was almost as debilitating as the avalanche of Alpha scents had been earlier. It took Kevin a few seconds to finally shrug tightly and say "I don't wanna be trouble..."

"Sugar, don't you say silly things like that," Missouri said, clapping her hand over his as she stood up, beginning to coax him to his feet.

"What Missouri said," Sam tacked on, as Kevin semi-reluctantly stood up.

"Don't think you have to rush down, either," Jess said. "We've got some food up there if you get hungry. The TV's not hooked up yet, but there are books. They're mostly books about Renaissance art written in Italian, though, so they might not be much use to you."

"Well, he could read it," Jody piped up weakly. "They just might not interest him."

"You know Italian, Kevin?" Jess asked brightly; it was hard to tell whether her cheeriness was a forced attempt to lighten the atmosphere, or genuine excitement a meeting someone with a shared interest.

"Um...it's more like an..."instinctual understanding"," Kevin said.

Jess cocked her head. "What, like...what?"

"I'm a xenogloss."

"Really? Dude, that's awesome," Sam said. "Much cooler than what I can do."
"What can you..." Kevin trailed off as some fallen leaves at their collective feet rose in a spiral.

"This is about the extent of it, though," Sam said, making the small tornado bob up and down in the air. "I can't move any animate objects either."

"Well, isn't this just the Special Abilities Club," Missouri commented mildly, tapping her nose once again. "20/10 olfaction."

"Um...IQ of 156," Charlie offered, raising her hand like a shy kid in class.

"I...bake?" Jess said. "People tell me I'm good at it?"

"We have to accept that we're the lamers here, Jess," Jody said with a laugh.

"Well, your abilities making you a target is kinda pretty lame, too." The words left Kevin's mouth before he really got a chance to think about them, and he winced at how effectively they shut down the convalescing mood's progress. Jess and Jody both looked to the ground, and Sam fixed him with an indecipherable look.

"I contacted the Lebanon PD last night, Kevin, while we were still at the hospital," Jody finally said. "Castiel spoke to them, too. They're starting an investigation and they're going to keep me posted."

"Oh, okay. That's...that's good." He tried to smile at her; she returned the attempt.

"So, uh." Sam cleared his throat. "Upstairs? You probably should still crash up there for a little bit, to be safe."

"Yeah, I guess," Kevin muttered, kicking at the ground.

"I'll take him up, guys," Charlie said. "It's not locked, right?"

"It is. There's a key under the mat."

"'Kay, thanks."

"You feel better, sugar," Missouri said, releasing Kevin's hand to allow him to go to Charlie. Sam, Jess, and Jody erupted in a quiet chorus of gentle well-wishes; Kevin nodded and mumbled his thanks before Charlie lightly took his arm and started leading him away.

"You guys are so nice," Kevin said, once out of earshot. "Like, sickeningly nice," he continued, not sounding the least bit disgusted.

"Yeah. You kinda forget that nice people exist," Charlie said, almost sagely, as she opened the side entrance to the Roadhouse, revealing a staircase leading up to the second story.

"Hey, Charlie?" Kevin said, venturing the nickname like an exotic fruit, when they were about halfway up the stairs.

"Yeah?"

"You said that...you were the only one who was like me, right? With the whole...trafficking thing."

"Yeah, why?" Charlie stepped on the landing and turned to face Kevin.

"'Cause Sam looked...he gave me a weird look when I said that thing about being targeted."
Charlie frowned as she stooped, moving the welcome mat over and picking up the key. "Well, as far as I know nothing like that happened to Sam." Charlie turned the lock; the door creaked as she pushed it open. "But I dunno. None of us really like to talk about stuff. So anything could have happened to him."

Sam and Jess's apartment was rather spacious, if sparsely inhabited. The door opened into a living room populated by a large throw rug, an old sofa with a blanket draped over it, and a tall bookshelf hosting a bulky, ancient television, some knickknacks, and a handful of textbooks and novels. On one side of the shelf was the entrance to a kitchen, not very large but big enough for two people to fit inside it snugly; on the other side was the entrance to the bathroom, a room which took up some space that would have otherwise belonged to the kitchen by housing the washer and dryer in addition to a sink, toilet, and shower. Directly opposite the front door was the bedroom; Kevin couldn't see inside it, but within resided a bed, a nightstand, a dresser, and a closet.

"All righty, so. Get yourself settled," Charlie said. "The floor's pretty soundproof but you can always pop back downstairs if you get lonely or start feeling better. I'll come back up to check on you in an hour, if you haven't come back yet, okay?"

"Okay." Kevin took a hesitant seat on the couch. "Thanks for...helping me out."

"No problem, Kev. I'm really just paying it forward." She flashed him a watery grin. "See you later, kiddo. Rest up."

"I will. See ya."

"Brother, it is two in the afternoon; you are not pounding vodka already."

"You're not the one giving a speech in front of all these people," Dean said, gesturing, drink in hand, around the entirety of the room before guiding the glass to his mouth.

"I'm also not the one who apparently got in a big fight with his ex," Benny said, gently but firmly, plucking the drink out of Dean's hand. "Lisa was in one hell of a snit when she came back to the car. What happened, brother?"

"Nothing. A big, fat, fucking nothing, in fact."

"Dean--"

"Let's just say I won't be joining rank with Sam and Jess any time soon. Or you and Andrea." Benny pulled his hand away, holding the glass out of Dean's reach. "Benny, I need to toast with that."

"And you'll get it back when it's toasting time." Benny placed it on a table behind him, moving in front of it like a fortress wall. "What happened?"

"I already told you, nothing. Nothing happened and nothing will happen because apparently, I'm an irresponsible asshole that attracts douchebags like a zapper attracts moths. Oh, and I'd be a terrible father, too. Can I have my damn drink back now?"

"I'm tempted," Benny said with a sympathetic grimace, "but no. Not yet."

"Are you my friggin' keeper or something?"
"I'm sorry, brother. About Lisa, not your drink."

"Yeah. Do me a favor, don't introduce me to any more of your DTF friends, okay?"

"On my honor." Benny rested a hand on Dean's shoulder. "You gonna be okay?"

"Oh, yeah. You know. I was just in love with love. And it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. We just weren't right for each other. Insert cliche of choice here. Where's Ben? Speaking of people I'm all wrong for..."

"I left him with Andrea so they could bond. Which means..." Benny turned his head, surveying the room until he found his son, "...she left him with Garth, who appears to have been well-prepared for just such a situation."

"I think Garth just carries that sock puppet around as a matter of course."

Benny sighed. "Don't be too envious of me and Andrea, Dean. I love that woman, but I've told her that we're not getting married until she accepts my son as her own. And that'll probably be a long time."

"I'm sorry, man," Dean said, patting Benny's arm just below his shoulder. "That's rough."

"Is what it is."

"You know, there's an easy solution to our problems."

"Lay it on me."

"You and I could get back together." Benny laughed, a loud guffaw. "Thanks, man. You know how to make a girl feel special."

"I'm sorry, brother," Benny said, behind a little smirk. "It just seems to me that without a third, you and I are better as friends."

"Whatever. If you're cool with the fact that you've already had the best you'll ever get, it's no skin off my back." Benny threw a light punch at Dean's shoulder, finally getting his friend to laugh. "Oh, yeah, Benny. You said you wanted to talk to me about something?"

"Yes, but, later." Benny figured he'd want to include Jody when he reported the incident with Ruby. "Don't want you to miss your cue."

"Which would be right about...now." Benny turned around to face the door; Sam, Jess, Jody, and Missouri were drifting inside. "See you on the other side, dude," Dean said, leaning around Benny and grabbing his drink before taking a few long strides across the floor, to the platform where they had run karaoke the previous night. Ash was already set up at the booth beside it, blasting music to keep the energy up. Dean gave him a thumbs-up and mouthed the words "They're here!" at him; Ash caught it and reached out a hand to turn down the music's volume, using his other hand to guide his microphone closer to his mouth.

"All right, ladies and gentleman, it looks like Sam and Jess have decided to grace us with their presence, so please give it up for the bride and groom!" The room erupted in somewhat belated but mostly enthusiastic cheering; Jody and Missouri slunk back and away from Sam and Jess, who were caught partially off-guard and blushing by Ash's abrupt introduction. "Sam, how about you bring that wife of yours out onto the dance floor and show her off while everyone takes their seats, huh?"
They had asked Ash not to let them lose the momentum of the ceremony, and so Sam did as bade. Self-conscious as she felt, Jess couldn't help but grin as she was paraded to the center of the restaurant, which had been cleared of tables in order to turn it into a dance floor, and was now being vacated by the guests to make it their stage. It was nice to be the subject of friendly stares for a change; to know that the gazes directed at you were from people who were happy for you. The smile transformed into a giggle when Sam suddenly spun her under his arm and into a hold, and she stood on tiptoe to give him a kiss.

"Ain't they adorable," Ash said, amidst a chorus of "Aww!" from the guests. "Okay, so, we have elected to get the boring part over and done with, so please pick up your glasses of blueberry vodka--apple juice for the pups that are present--and get ready to raise them, 'cause we're about to have a toast up in here. If you would please turn your attention to Mr. Dean Harvelle..."

There was no spotlight, but Dean felt like there may as well have been.

"Um...hi," Dean said, fiddling with the standing microphone on the platform. From the corner of his eye he saw Charlie sneak inside the restaurant; she gave him a hesitant double thumbs-up. "Well, I'm Dean, as you all...probably know." There was a roll of giggles. "Brother of the groom. Brother to the bride now, too, actually."

He tipped his glass toward Jess; a few women cooed their approval of his sentiment.

"I, uh...most of you know I'm not that great with words. Or feelings. Or anything, really." There were a few more laughs; the corner of Dean's mouth tipped up in a weak smile. "So I, uh...instead of trying to write something myself and have it turn out to be crap, I went digging for something that I thought'd be good for them. And I wound up finding this..."elegy" by, uh...Rainer Maria Rilke--I know I said that wrong." More giggles. "So anyway I made some edits, because it was pretty long and kinda high-falutin' for a dropout like me, so I'm hoping to hell that what I got makes sense and that my brother and his wife like it."

Dean cleared his throat, reached into his pocket, and drew out a folded and slightly bent piece of paper. He snapped it open as best he could onehandedly and then held it up and away from him, eye-level.

"Look, sometimes I find that my hands have become aware of each other, and that my face shelters itself between them," he recited, his voice slightly modulated to imitate an invisible other speaker. "That gives me a decent enough feeling. But who would exist just for that?" He allowed himself a second to breathe. "You two, though," and he lowered his hand slightly, to allow Sam and Jess into his view unobstructed, "I know you two touch so blissfully because the touch preserves. Because the place you so tenderly cover doesn't disappear. Because underneath your hands, you feel pure duration. And so you, essentially, promise each other forever with an embrace." Dean paused, taking another, stronger breath. "Remember your hands, and how easily they rest on each other. The world can push down harder on you. But that's the world's business."

He brought his hand down, nervously crumpling the piece of paper in his fist. "So I, um...guess I just wanted to say that...I've spent the last eight years watching Sam and Jess be good to each other, even when...especially when things got hard. And I just hope I get to see them being good to each other for the next eighty years. You know, from the bathroom, where I've been throwing up the whole time." He raised his glass, a little stiffly. "To Sam and Jess."

"To Sam and Jess," the room echoed, a forest of glasses in the air. Dean tilted his head back as he drank, almost draining his glass completely; he missed Jess's misty eyes, and the pleased, proud look on Sam's face. "Take it away from me, Ash. Please."
"Thank you for that beautiful and blessedly short speech, Dean," Ash said, leaning his mouth against his microphone once more. "And now, if y'all could kindly turn your attention back to Sam and Jess, as they have their first dance together as husband and wife."

Dean stepped heavily off the platform and collapsed into the closest seat--incidentally at the same table that Castiel had taken once he was informed that there was no assigned seating--as the first strains of a prerecorded piano began filtering through the air.

"Sam..." Jess breathed as she recognized the melody; Sam merely hummed along with it, wrapping his arms around the small of her back and pulling her flush against him. It appeared she hadn't been the only one with a surprise for the day; this song was one that she, with the university women's choir she had belonged to before the fire had taken her out of school for weeks, had performed in concert.

Jess pushed herself on tiptoe again, shortening the already small steps she could take; her mouth pressed up against Sam's ear, and in elegantly cracked pitch she began singing the Soprano II part.

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ will be earth; you be the flower} \\
You \text{ have found my root; you are the rain} \\
I \text{ will be boat, and you, the rower} \\
You \text{ rock me, you toss me; you are the sea} \\
\text{How be steady earth that's now afllood?} \\
The \text{ root is the oar afloat where has blown our bud} \\
We \text{ will be desert; pure salt, the seed} \\
\text{Burn, radiant love; born, scorpion need} \\
\text{Burn, radiant love; born, scorpion need} \\
I \text{ will be earth; you be the flower} \\
You \text{ have found my root; you are the rain} \\
I \text{ will be boat, and you, the rower} \\
\text{You rock me and toss me; you rock me and toss me} \\
\text{You rock me and toss me; rock me and toss me} \\
You \text{ are the sea} \\
\text{You are the sea}
\end{align*}
\]

Ash allowed a pause, holding a stillness that gave the couple time to soak in the moment and their spectators to bask in it. At the end of the moment he came close to his microphone, tapped it to break the spell, and said, "Now if y'all could haul yourselves to your feet and make your way onto the dance floor, we can get this party started!"

"You aren't dancing?" Castiel half-shouted to Dean, over the din of a jaunty electric guitar and people rising and chatting, when he noticed that Dean made no move to stand up.
Dean shook his head, settling back in his chair as the lyrics began. "Got no one to dance with," he half-shouted back.

Not for the first time did Castiel curse his sprained ankle. In a weak effort to make up for it he somehow finagled his way over a few chairs until he settled in the one immediately next to Dean.

"That was a great speech you gave," Castiel said, still loud but no longer needing to yell due to their new-found proximity.

"You think so? I thought it turned out kinda lame..."

"Not at all. It was a good mix of funny and classy, and sentimental without being overwrought. You could tell that Sam and Jess liked it."

"Oh, good. Thanks, Cas."

"If I know one thing that's true / It's that I'm never leaving you," the singer belted over the crowd; Dean began thumping his heel against the floor to the beat, his gaze drifting over to watch the other guests dance. "And you don't say much, that's true / But I lose it when you do..."

"Are you a fan of Rilke?"

"Huh?" Dean turned his head to face Castiel again. "Oh, no. I mean, the first I read from him was when I went looking for something to say for my speech. But what I read of his stuff was pretty cool. Why, you a fan?"

"It's more like I'm familiar with his work. I was a Comparative Lit major."

He certainly spoke like one. "Lit-major-turned-vigilante. That's some career change."

Castiel shrugged. "I didn't know what to study when I went to college. I just chose that based on one of my brothers' suggestions."

"Well, you could've majored in procrastination like most of the people I went to school with, so. Good for you for picking something."

"What did you study? Before you dropped out..."

"Enh. Liberal arts. I just went to Kansas City Community. Got my Associate's and jumped ship."

"So you didn't actually drop out. You just obtained a degree and decided not to pursue further education."

"If you wanna look at it that way." Dean crossed his arms and leaned back, balancing on the back two legs of his chair.

"What made you stop at an Associate's? If you don't mind my asking."

"Couple reasons. I'd rather be working than studying, for one. Sammy, he's what I call the goal-oriented reader. He wants what he reads to be useful to him later on. Freak actually enjoys reading his text books. Me, if I pick up a book, I want it to be only for fun. So I wasn't exactly keepin' up with the assigned reading. And Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby needed extra hands around the Roadhouse and the Yard anyway, so I figured why waste their money when I could be helping them out? I'm probably going to be taking over whichever business Jo doesn't want, anyway, and it's not like I need a degree for that."
"Your family has another business?"

"Yeah, Singer's Salvage Yard. Uncle Bobby's run it since before they got married; that's why it's not "Harvelle's Salvage"." The fact that Ellen could have insisted on a name change and apparently didn't make Castiel's respect for Ellen expand, out of genuineness instead of fear this time. "Me and Jo switch off between here and there; I work weekdays at the Roadhouse and weekends at the Yard. She's the other way around."

"So you're probably going to run the Roadhouse, I take it."

"Probably." Dean got a slightly faraway look in his eyes, but before Castiel could decide if he wanted to probe deeper into that, Charlie and Jo launched themselves from the crowd into clinging to Dean's neck, bringing his chair back to rights with a loud thunk.

"Erk! Suffocating...can't...breathe...I'm dead." Dean flopped in his chair, rolling his head to one side and sticking his tongue out the side of his mouth.

"Dea~n come dance," Charlie said, tugging on Dean's ear. Kevin had been her shadow for twelve hours and being without him had made her giddy, but in a lonely way.

"Yeah, come on, you bum," Jo added, pinching Dean's tongue between her thumb and forefinger. Dean jerked his head back and wiped his mouth with his hand, before reaching to drag his slightly moistened palm against Jo's cheek. "Ew, you dick!" Jo smacked the back of Dean's head.

"You actually grabbed my tongue, but me getting barely any spit on your face is gross. Right."

"You doing anything is gross."

"Oh, then, I guess I won't go out and dance with you guys."

"Dea~n," Charlie whined.

"No, no, I'm sorry, Charlene. Our dear sister has made it quite clear that she does not desire my company."

"Jo~!"

"Dean's just being an asshole," Jo said. "He'd just rather hang out with Cas than with us."

"The man has a temporary disability, Joanna Beth. It would be rather rude to just ditch him. Didn't your mama raise you with any manners?"

"Oh, shut the fuck up and go dance with Charlie. I'll keep your new boyfriend company."

"C'mon, Jo..." He didn't check to see if Castiel had reacted to Jo's words but he could feel a faint heat rising in his cheeks. Shit, he rebounded fast, didn't he? Years of pining after Lisa and now he was blushing over Castiel. The urge to drink rose again within him.

"You can bring her back at the end of a song and we'll switch back and forth. It'll be like joint custody."

"Can we actually get divorced?" Dean forced himself to say.

"Only if you're ready to pay alimony out the ass." Dean groaned. "Hey, I don't come cheap and I don't leave cheap, either. Now take responsibility for the little monster here before I call CPS and this metaphor gets stretched any further."
Dean saluted, smart and smart-assed, but he turned his head to look at Castiel again. "You gonna be okay?"

"Go have fun," Castiel said with a wave of his hand. "I'll see you when your visitation's up."

With a somewhat guilty look on his face Dean allowed Charlie to pull him to his feet and drag him onto the dance floor. Jo flopped into Dean's vacated chair once he was out of the way.

"So hi," Jo said, extending a hand to Castiel; he took it. "I'm sure you know by now but I'm Jo Harvelle. And you are Castiel Shurley." Castiel nodded briefly. "Good to meet ya."

"Likewise." Castiel cast his mind about for something to say. "Dean was telling me that you two help run your parents' businesses."

"That we do."

"So I take it that you also don't go to college?"

"Nah. Sam 'n' Charlie are the eggheads; me 'n' Dean are the working stiffs. I went to school for about a month, but it wasn't interesting enough to justify all the assholes bugging me, so I dropped out."

"You were being harassed?" Castiel ran a finger around the rim of his glass.

"Yeah. I don't know how Jess puts up with it; universities are crawling with Alpha jerkoffs. No offense."

"None taken."

"I thought about going to community college like Dean did, 'cause there are a lot more Betas and Omegas there," and Castiel now suspected that was also part of the reason why Dean had stopped his education at an Associate's degree, "but I figured it wasn't worth spending the money on something that didn't interest me. So now Charlie's using my college fund and I'm learning how to run a small business."

"Which one are you planning on running?" He found himself inwardly crossing his fingers that she'd confirm her preference for her father's business.

"Probably the Yard." Whew. "Dean likes working with cars but he's obviously favorin' the Roadhouse. He cooks more'n my mom does and she actually owns the place." Castiel caught Jo surreptitiously glancing at him, and her words took on a more deliberate tone. "He likes that kinda thing. Feeding people, looking after them, that stuff. He'd be a good dad."

From the corner of his eye Castiel saw Ben, as if on cue, skitter across the dance floor to join Charlie and Dean in the partially on-beat jumping they were qualifying as "dancing". A pained look flashed across Dean's face, but disappeared by the time Dean stooped to pick Ben up.

"May I ask?" Castiel said before he could stop himself.

"Depends on what you're asking."

"I am...curious about Dean's relationship to Ben."

"O--h, you go straight for the juicy gossip, don't you?" Jo grinned at Castiel's abashed look.

"If it's private..."
"Not in the slightest. Literally everyone here knows." Jo leaned in conspiratorially nonetheless. "You see that guy over there?" Jo pointed in Benny's direction; the man was keeping half an eye on his son while carrying on what looked like a somewhat tense conversation with whom Castiel presumed to be Andrea. "That's Benny Lafitte. He," Jo lifted an index finger, "and Dean," she lifted her other one, "used to be boyfriends." She pressed the two fingers together at the tips. "And they had a mutual girlfriend," she pressed her thumbs together, forming a triangle, "Lisa Braeden."

"...Ah," Castiel said, at a complete loss for anything else to say.

"Yeah. It was a weird fuckbuddy-soulmate thing they had going on for awhile. And then one day, Lisa's whole family disappears."

"She was pregnant, I take it."

"Yep. And she freaked out and told her parents everything. Understandable, I guess. She's nineteen, hasn't moved out yet, she's still financially dependent...anyway. Her folks didn't really like the fact that she'd been shuffling two guys for a year, especially not these particular two guys. "Quality" Alphas like the Braedens do not breed with Omegas like Dean or degenerates like Benny, you see. Pollutes the bloodstream. So they peace out, and apparently they were going to force her to either abort the kid or give him up for adoption, but she got away from them before they could do that. She spends about two and a half years wandering around the US before coming back to Lawrence. Now in the meantime Benny has moved on, as you can tell." Yes, but not necessarily to greener pastures, if his current unhappy look was anything to go by. "But Dean's been out of his mind not knowing what happened to her, because she hasn't been in touch. At all. Then one day she shows up with a little kid named Ben and says she named him after his dad and Dean's brain explodes."

Castiel nodded, slowly.

"You're taking this awful calmly. Dean said you were religious." She seemed oddly pleased.

"You can't throw a stone in the First Testament without hitting a polygamous arrangement," Castiel said. "Also, some of my brothers have gotten up to more...unusual...amorous exploits."

"I really wanna meet your family, Cas."

"You will. Well, a few of them. I'm getting picked up by them tomorrow."

"Awesome. Can't wait. Anyway, so, like I said, Lisa comes back to town all "Hey Dean guess who isn't the father of my adorable child, here's a hint, it's you, go fuck yourself" and has been jerking him around ever since."

"You don't like Lisa."

"No, I don't. I don't like anyone who thinks my brother is good enough to fuck but not good enough to mate."

Jo's candor almost made Castiel blurt out the parts of the fight between Dean and Lisa that he had overheard, but it was one thing for a sister to tell Dean's stories and quite another for a near-stranger to do the same. Jo's missive against Lisa felt strangely like a warning shot, and it seemed unwise to do anything that might come off as disrespectful towards Dean.

"You are...okay with Benny, though?"

"Him and Dean just kinda stopped one day," Jo said with a shrug. "It was an actual mutual thing, so there weren't any hard feelings. He's actually been a really good friend to Dean and all of us.
And he doesn't look at Dean like Dean's going to let Ben wander into traffic, unlike Lisa, so that's a plus."

"All right, it's your turn." Dean had appeared behind Jo; he had transferred Ben to Charlie and left them entertaining each other on the dance floor. "And quit gossiping about me, I know you're doing it."

"Why would anyone want to talk about you?" Jo teased, standing up. Dean smacked her backside as she stepped around him, she returned it with an elbow to his side.

"So was she gossiping about me? In all seriousness."

"Yes, but it was my fault," Castiel said. "I asked about your relationship to Ben."

"Oh. Listen, that's...that's...sorry. You probably didn't want to be regaled with lurid tales from my sluttier days. Awkward."

"Polyamory is well-recorded in history, including church history." And family history he could almost hear Balthazar singsonging in his ear.

"Yeah, well. Still. And uh...I know Jo probably talked shit about Lisa, and I don't know how much of that fight we had you overheard, but...she's not a bad person. Lisa isn't, I mean. Jury's still out on Jo." He grinned weakly, before grimacing. "I sound pretty whipped, don't I."

"No." Castiel drew himself up in his seat; he hadn't realized until now that normally he would stand when making just such a declaration. "Graciousness is an admirable trait, Dean. So is loyalty."

Dean looked like someone had handed him a present that he didn't know what to do with, and it took him a moment to clear his throat and then stammer, "You want something from the buffet table? They're opening up the finger food."

Castiel said that he did, and Dean returned with two skewers of frog legs, and two glasses of blueberry vodka. Castiel couldn't think of a tactful way to point out that while Dean had given both skewers to Castiel, he had set both glasses closer to his own seat.

Chapter End Notes

So this seems to be an ongoing theme where I fully intend to write a longer chapter, and halfway through the chapter does what my dog does when I take her for a walk when it's too hot: lies down in the middle of it and refuses to go any further. At least we got to hear from Kevin, Jo, Missouri, and Jody again; I missed them. As I've said to some people, I don't have many concrete plans for this story, but if I played my cards right this chapter was full of foreshadowing and worldbuilding, so I hope you liked it :)"

Also, I made an 8tracks playlist for the music that shows up in TFatL! It includes the songs that are sung in whole ("Young and Beautiful", "I Will Be Earth") or in part ("Big Balls", "Love Don't Die"), and also songs that are referenced ("Scarlet's Walk") or namedropped ("Baby Got Back", I Will Survive", "Amazing Grace"). They are listed in order of appearance.
The group performing Sam and Jess's wedding song in the 8tracks playlist is the Rutgers University Queens Chorale, and yes that is MY college women's choir and I'm singing in the recording, though you can't hear me specifically :) I had a hard time choosing a wedding song for Sam and Jess, but in the end I decided that a highly literary (the song is taken from a poem by May Swenson) and achingly romantic song--and a choral one that Jess could have sung in--was the best fit for these two sentimental nerds :'3
I arranged the Campbell family dynamics thusly: Samuel and Deanna had two children, Mark and Mary (because I think silly/sentimental naming conventions are a thing in the Campbell family). Mary married John Winchester and had Dean and Sam. Mark married a woman he later divorced, but while married he had two kids, Gwen and Christian, who are around Sam and Dean's age. Christian is recently married to Arlene. Samuel, Deanna, and Christian are Alphas; Gwen is a Beta; Mark and Arlene are Omegas.

Jody apparently does not own a cell phone.

"Was everything okay before, hon?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah..." Jody said weakly. Ash had put on a slow song that quieted even the middle of the dance floor, allowing the guests to talk to each other without yelling. Jody had worn a frown ever since she came back into the Roadhouse, after sending Sean and Owen in ahead of her while she went to see if Charlie needed help with Kevin. "Kevin just had a minor...thing."

Sean nodded. "Guess that's to be expected."

"Actually I wanted to give his mother a call, give her a status update." Jody unwound her arms from around her husband and stepped back. "Could you snag us some food too? I'm kinda hungry."

"Sure."

Bobby and Ellen had jokingly set up the Old Fogeys' Table while they were preparing the Roadhouse for the reception, where they expected to sit with Garth, Jim, Jody and Sean, Rufus, Missouri, and Pamela. Garth had freed up a seat when he went to entertain first Ben and then Owen with Mr. Fizzles and the rest of the sock puppet company, but more chairs and an extra table had to be added when the Campbell family showed up and realized they knew nobody beyond Sam, Dean, Bobby, and Ellen. It was to this set of tables that Sean returned, bearing a plate of venison steak drizzled with lingonberry sauce in one hand and a plate of smoked salmon and scrambled eggs in the other.

"Where's your wife?" Rufus asked, seeing him approach.

"Calling the rescued kid's mom," Sean said, taking his seat.

"Could somebody actually explain to us the deal with this rescued child?" Samuel asked, stabbing a piece of his own venison steak with his fork. "We haven't gotten a whole story out of anyone yet."

"Why don't you feel a little more strongly about that, Samuel?" Pamela said, eying the unfortunate piece of meat now skewered on tines.

"I don't like being out of the loop."
Bobby resisted the urge to both roll his eyes and grimace in sympathy. He imagined it would be devastating to go nearly fifteen years not knowing where his grandchildren were, sometimes questioning if they were alive when the distance between John's postcards, never sent with a return address or a line written by either of the boys, exceeded half a year. It might also have added insult to injury to finally be reconnected with his daughter's children only after they had been adopted by someone else. But that wasn't the Harvelles' fault—if they hadn't petitioned for custody when they did, Dean would have become an adult as an Omega lone wolf with no money and a handful of petty theft accusations to his name, and prosecutors loved easy marks like that. It wasn't like anyone involved knew where the Campbells even were at the time. And it certainly didn't give the man the right to be an ass.

"There isn't very much to tell," Missouri said. "That man," she pointed across the floor to Castiel, "found Kevin imprisoned in a barn, freed him, and went on the run. They came to the Roadhouse last night accidentally, and Ellen and Bobby are putting them up."

"And who took him? Do you know that?"

"Castiel--that's the rescuer--thinks it's probably the Romans," Ellen said. "Given their track record I wouldn't be surprised." Her eyes flicked over to Charlie, and the corner of her mouth twitched. The redhead, clad in an elegant half-white/half-black gown and dancing with one of Sam and Jess's school friends--Lily?--that she had nursed a crush on for awhile, was a far cry from the girl that Sam and Dean had brought to the Roadhouse two years ago, but if Ellen squinted and tilted her head she could still see the shivering brunette in dirty jeans and a stolen hoodie, cradling her broken arm in its weak counterpart.

"The Romans?" Arlene piped up, clutching Christian's arm. "You mean the people who run the Roman Adoption Agency?"

"The very same."

"We put in an application there." She turned her anxious eyes to her husband. "Honey, maybe we should retract it..."

"Calm down." Christian clapped a hand over his wife's. "There's no proof that the Romans were involved, right?"

"Not with Kevin, not yet," Bobby said. "But Charlie was definitely in one of their quote-unquote "shelters"."

"Did they have her legally in their custody?"

"Technically yes, if they didn't fudge the paperwork from when her mother was hospitalized, but fact remains that what they were doing to her was as far from legal as you could get."

"But those things were happening in the foster homes, right? Not within the shelter itself."

"Jesus, you sound like their fucking lawyer," Bobby growled. "If they were worth a shit as an agency they'd've been placing her in quality homes."

"Are you sure they weren't?"

"Boy, what are you playing at?" Ellen said, a dangerous thread running through her voice.

"I'm just saying. Betas and Omegas are hard to place, and there are statistics to back that up. If you've got a Beta with a chip on her shoulder against Alphas and you put her in a home run by
"Alphas, there're gonna be problems; that's not the agency's fault."

"Excuse me?" Ellen rose to her feet, planting her hands and leaning over the table. "You mind running that by me again? Because that sounded an awful lot like you callin' Charlie a delinquent."

"I meant no disrespect."

"The hell you didn't," Ellen spat, fire rising on her cheeks. "How dare you, coming into my establishment and slandering my daughter to my face. In case you missed it, I'm an Alpha, and she's been an angel to me since day one, so your little hypothesis is for shit. You have no idea of the hell she's been through, and the next words out of your mouth better be an apology or I will walk your ignorant ass out of my restaurant."

When a quick glance around the table showed him that even his own relatives were not exactly on his side, Christian threw up his hands and leaned back in his chair. "I'm sorry," he said, in the manner of one who wishes to avoid a confrontation but not admit fault. "I'm sure I have no idea about Charlie's experiences, or the inner workings of the Roman Adoption Agency. I was out of line. I apologize."

Ellen sat down, slowly, a glare frozen onto her face. Deanna fiddled uncomfortably with her silverware before finally saying, "You know, I noticed something fishy about all this. We've all been helping Christian and Arlene with the adoption process, so I've been doing some digging. Christian is right that Beta and Omega children are harder to place, no matter what agency it is. So if people say they want to foster one, they'll basically throw the kid at you. It's hard to tell from the outside if they're just eager to get the kids in a home, or if they couldn't give a rip who takes them."

"Or if they're profiting off selling kids to every Tom, Dick, and Asshole who wants a breathing blow-up doll," Ellen very nearly snarled.

"Kevin was never fostered, though," Sean volunteered before the group could plunge into uncomfortable silence. "So part of the investigation is going to be figuring out why the Romans took him."

"If it was, in fact, the Romans," Christian muttered.

"Romans or no," Rufus interrupted before Ellen could launch herself over the table, "this is obviously a huge problem, and something needs to be done about it."

"What are you thinking?" Gwen asked. "Anything you'd want to do on a large scale is going to take major dough."

Rufus raised his eyebrows and jerked his chin in Castiel's direction. "And now we know someone who has it. Or whose family has it, at least."

"Yes, and who exactly is that guy?" Samuel asked.

"Castiel Shurley," Bobby supplied. "I don't know if you know about them over in Michigan, but here in Kansas the Shurley family is kind of a big deal. You know the Heartland Prophet?"

"I've heard of it." It was hard to miss at least one piece of the nationally circulated newspaper/online news source/television network/publishing company puzzle no matter where in the country you lived.

"His daddy owned it. And his mama was the prize-winning face of it until they retired. Their oldest son runs the family business now. And the rest of his family's in whatever you can think of."
Business, politics, real estate, the freakin' National Guard...you can't shake a stick without pointing at something the Shurleys own or run."

"So you've got friends in high places now."

"Hopefully."

"Hopefully?" Mark piped up.

"The Shurleys are...old-money," Ellen filled in. "So between the family you have old-money-eccentric types, and old-money-some-people-have-disappeared types."

"Jesus..."

"Castiel himself might be fine, but if he's dependent on someone else in his family and they're the second kind of old money..."

"I doubt it," Pamela said. "Unless they don't know about his little vigilante operation."

"Well, it's not like that's impossible to keep secret," Mark said. "Mary pulled it off for awhile."

"I'm sorry?" Jim piped up, the first words he said since his initial greeting when he sat down.

Mark raised his eyebrows and glanced around the table: half of his seatmates wore stunned expressions; the other half wore ones with a mix of guilt and sad nostalgia.

"Guess that proves my point."

"And you're sure he's fine?"

"As fine as he can be," Jody said, for the third or fourth time since she began telling Kevin's mother about his panic attack. "Honestly, Mrs. Tran--"

"Linda."

"Linda. And I'm Jody. And honestly, he's handling everything remarkably well. I mean, I'm a cop, not a therapist, so I don't know if it's normal or if it's just from shock and it'll wear off or what, but aside from this little episode it seems like he's functioning just fine. The Harvelles have a daughter, Charlie, and she's taken him under her wing, so to speak. She's keeping him distracted, mainly."

"Good. Good." Linda exhaled shakily, tearily. "He's...Kevin is very strong."

"I've gotten the impression."

"It's been...we don't live where...it's always been very hard for him, being what he is. All of what he is. He's always managed to soldier through it. But this...this I don't know how he's going to get past it."

"We will make sure he does," Jody said firmly. Her eye wandered over to the kitchen door as it opened, and maternal concern shifted focus from Linda to...what was her name, one of Sam and Jess's friends, Lily? No, Lindsay, the one he hadn't met in group, even though she was in recovery, too. And shit if she didn't look awful, wide-eyed and pale and...shaking?

"Thank you," Linda said, oblivious to Jody's distraction. "Look, I should get back to the car. I think
I'm almost two-thirds of the way there now."

"Okay," Jody said, returning half of her attention to Linda. "You be safe, all right? Don't rush yourself into an accident. Kevin is safe and sound here."

"I'll try," Linda said, with a weak laugh. "Thank you, again, Jody. Have Kevin call me when he feels better, okay?"

"I will."

"Thanks. Good-bye."

"Bye." Jody hung up the phone, cringing inwardly a bit at how grateful she was to stop talking to Linda now that a problem had set itself before her eyes. "What's wrong, hon?"

"Someone's brought demonblood here."

"I'm sorry?"

"I smelled it," Lindsay said, clasping her hands together tightly and looking down at the floor. Bloodsuckers, as they were referred to in common parlance, were particularly sensitive to the otherwise faint sulfur smell of demonblood, no matter how many years they had been clean. It was part of what made relapse so common. "So Sam and the others might smell it, too, and..."

"Do you know who has it?"

"I don't know his name, but I could point him out."

"All right, please do." She motioned for Lindsay to come to her; once she did, Jody took Lindsay's arm and hooked it around her own, twisting them together and using her elbow to clasp Lindsay to her side. Better to be safe than sorry when Jody pushed open the kitchen door and asked, "Can you see him?"

Lindsay scanned the room, shifting her weight anxiously between her feet, before pointing. "Him. He's got it."

"Benny?"

"If that's his name..." Lindsay said with a tight shrug. "I smelled it when I passed him."

"You stay here," Jody said. This was going to be interesting, to say the least. "I'm going to speak with him outside. You can join the party again when you feel comfortable."

Lindsay nodded, and let go of Jody with some reluctance. Jody shared the feeling but nevertheless resolutely marched across the floor to Benny, whose quibble with Andrea had been interrupted by their mutual need for food, prompting them to join Dean and Castiel at their table.

Her interest piqued when Benny caught sight of her. His expression seemed to say that he had been waiting for her, as did his body when he stood from his chair while she was still several feet away. "My apologies for interrupting, ma chérie," he drawled, cutting Andrea off mid-sentence; she glared at him. "I promise this will all make sense later. Dean, step outside with me and Officer Mills?"

"What...?" Dean caught sight of Jody from the corner of his eye; she stopped a few paces away from them with her arms folded. Dean took a moment to blink, recovering a few memories of
Benny saying to wait for whatever it was he needed to tell Dean, and stood up once they were firmly entrenched in his mind. "Okay. Cas, Drea, be back soon."

Benny dropped a kiss on a begrudging Andrea's head and pushed his chair in. "You might want to get your folks, too," he directed at Dean, whose befuddled expression took on a smear of concern. Nonetheless he drifted over to Bobby and Ellen's table, holding his questions, while Benny followed Jody outside.

"You picking up a little side business, Benny?" Jody asked, once the door had shut behind them.

"No," Benny said, with a weak chuckle. "Pest control keeps me pretty busy. Why?"

"Cause one of Sam and Jess's friends said she smelled demonblood on you."

"Well, she wasn't wrong, but I sure ain't making money off it." Benny reached into his pocket and drew forth the small bag Ruby had throw onto the Harvelle's porch, brandishing it in the dimming light for Jody to see.

"So tell me why you've got a controlled substance on your person and you brought it to a former addict's wedding, Benny."

"Is that what I think it is?" Ellen's voice drifted over Benny's shoulder from behind; the door banged angrily shut behind her, Bobby, and Dean.

"Please tell me this is a prank," Bobby muttered.

"'Fraid not, Bobby," Benny said with a grimace, stepping back and arranging himself so he could see all of his audience. "Dean asked me to check on Sam before the wedding. When I got there, our old friend Ruby Masters was there, tryin' to torment him with this."

"That bitch," Ellen spat.

"I talked her into pissing off but she left this as a parting gift. Sam thinks that it might be fake since she abandoned it with him, and she was just coming around to mess with him, but I figured the good folks over at Narcotics or Forensics or whatever should take a look at it."

Jody groaned. "Shit. I'm really sure Sam isn't gonna wanna be questioned about this tonight..."

"Absolutely not," Ellen said, her hands balled into fists. "You are not questioning him tonight, Jody. Ruby fucking Masters is not ruining Sam and Jess's wedding with her little criminal antics."

"I understand," Jody said wearily. "Regardless, there are, what, five people in there who are on the wagon? I'd like to keep it that way. This can't stay here." She held out her hand, and Benny placed the bag in her palm. "I'll drop this off at the station and come back. Kathleen's off tonight, so I could run this through Donna and get it to testing without her insisting on questioning you guys immediately..."

"I could come to the station later tonight to answer questions," Benny offered.

"That'd be good. Maybe we can talk to Sam tomorrow after dinner. That'll give the labs enough time to see if this is fake or not. Even if it is, you could still bring harassment charges."

"Believe me, we will be," Bobby muttered darkly. He saw movement from the corner of his eye, and turned his head to face it fully. "Dean? Where do you think you're going?"
"I'm gonna go kick that bitch's ass, that's where I'm going."

"Whoa-whoa-whoa, slow your roll, there, brother," Benny said, stepping forward catching Dean by the shoulder before he could get too far. "Much as she deserves it, now's not the time."

"And when is the time, Benny?" Dean snapped, jerking his shoulder out of Benny's grip and whirling around to face him. "How much longer am I supposed to put up with this shit? That bitch thinks she can come to our fucking home because it's Beta Central with an Omega cherry on top and dick with my brother on the most important day of his life, and I'm fucking tired of it."

"Brother, I understand--"

"No. No you absolutely do not."

"All right, I sympathize," Benny amended.

"And I do too, but if you just go to her house and attack her, I will have to arrest you," Jody said, almost regretfully.

"Look, Dean..." Benny took Dean's arms and pulled, dragging him a few feet away from Jody, Bobby, and Ellen. "We can fix Ruby good later," he continued, his voice low; he could tell that Jody was doing her darnedest to pretend she hadn't the faintest idea of what he was proposing. "But if we do it right, it's going to be a thing, and a thing isn't what Sam needs right this second. Revenge is best served cold anyway, right? See, I watched those stupid Star Trek DVDs you foisted on me."

"Fuck you," Dean mumbled, impotently.

"No thanks. Maybe five years ago. Look, we'll figure something out on the camping trip, okay? If you're still planning on trying to show up."

"Course I am."

Benny couldn't tell how much spite tinged Dean's answer but he wasn't going to try to probe now. "Good. Then that's what we'll do. You keep your shit together for the next day and a half, and then we'll fuck her shit up. All right?"

"Fine," Dean growled. "I'll hold off."

"Great." Benny squeezed Dean's shoulder before turning to face the others again. "All right, so, I'll stay out here with the stuff until you're ready to go, Officer Mills."

"Thanks Benny. Just gonna get my keys and coat..." She trailed off as she drifted back inside the restaurant.

"And I'm gonna get drunk," Dean said, almost viciously, stalking inside after her.

Jody watched Dean make for where the MostPlaters hired hands were serving up the food and alcohol and grimaced a bit, but Dean was the implacable sort. She instead dropped by the Old Fogeys' Table to kiss her husband and let him know she had some police business to take care of and she'd be back in about 45 minutes--Ellen and Bobby had come back inside, let them explain what was happening--and then made for the one chair that could be spared to have everyone's coats piled on top of it, because it was going to be very cold by the time she got back.

"So what's going on?" Lindsay was at her shoulder, this time flanked by Max, who also looked
pale and shaken.

"Everything's fine," Jody said, pawing through the misshapen lump of coats and jackets. "It was just a hand-off and it was meant to get to me; no one's dealing anything at this party."

"Oh good," Lindsay breathed out, tremulously.

"Where is it now?" Max asked.

"It's outside. I'm taking it down to the police station." Jody tilted her head questioningly. "Why?" she asked slowly, with a hint of warning.

"Nothing. I just..." Max kicked at the floor. "Just seems like I can still smell it, is all," he mumbled.

"I think that's in your head now, hon," Jody said, with what she hoped was a comforting smile. "Try to distract yourself for a bit; it'll go away."

Max nodded mutely. Some sliver of doubt lodged itself in Jody's brain for a second, but it wiggled its way out as her mind turned towards mentally mapping the route to the police station from the Roadhouse, and hoping that Kathleen didn't decide to come in on her night off.

Chapter End Notes

And AGAIN a chapter gets split in half. This is going to be a long-ass fic, yo.

Good news is that the next chapter is about half-done and it is full of Dean/Cas sorta-cuddles and Sam/Jess sexytimes. Expect flangst. Oodles of flangst.

Sorry this took so long. I basically re-wrote everything several times and I'm still not entirely happy with the end result, but I need to move on. Gabriel is bugging me to let him show up XD Soon, soon...
Chapter Notes

I've never been drunk and I don't hang out around drunk people with any regularity, so I apologize if Drunk!Dean isn't very believable.

Grass is an emetic for dogs, thus also for werewolves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean was proud to call himself a man of his word. If he said he was going to get drunk, then he was going to follow through.

Benny had kept an eye on him for awhile, but when Andrea not-quite-whispered to him that she was ready to leave and Ben likewise--but more cutely, being four years old and not, as Dean mumbled under his breath as he went for another glass, *a grown fucking woman who could be a little more gracious*--confessed to his father that he was bored, as well, Benny sighed, inwardly decided that he should really get his fiancee and son settled at the house (who knows, maybe they'd finally start bonding) and go to the police station before it got too late.

It was sad seeing them go, especially when Ben ran from the door to Dean's table when he realized he had neglected to give Dean a hug. Dean knocked one back extra hard as soon as Ben was out the door.

He did feel bad, a little. He imagined that maybe it wasn't quite fair to Castiel for his most constant company to be getting wasted right in front of him. Unfortunately the part of his brain that controlled the logical next step--stop drinking--was already impaired by the time that thought occurred to him.

For his part, Castiel noticed that Dean got up to get a new drink what felt like an awful lot, but it was somewhat easy to lose track when Dean took every other dance (or every third, once Kevin had come down from the apartment and got roped into dancing with Charlie), and he didn't know how much was too much for Dean, anyway.

Not until too much actually happened.

"If you've come to offer assistance, it is highly appreciated."

Bobby sighed. Jo had gone to fetch him when Dean had stumbled his way through the latest dance floor transfer; Charlie echoed her concern after Dean spent more time leaning on her than moving to the music. Bobby pretended to take his time finishing a conversation with Rufus before shuffling across the floor, to where Castiel was looking up at him with helpless eyes, and where Dean had planted his forehead onto the table.

"This kid of mine..." Bobby grumbled. "You awake, idjit?" He rapped his knuckles against the back of Dean's skull; Dean groaned in response. "Good. That means you can walk still. Up we go, Drunken Beauty. Jesus, it's only six o'clock..."

Dean let Bobby tug on his shoulder and bring his head up only to mock-growl and swipe at Bobby
before returning to his original position.

"Oh, come on."

"Whoa, everything okay?" Bobby and Castiel turned their heads to see Sam standing behind them.

"Your idjit brother here has...imbibed," Bobby said, tugging harder on Dean's shoulder and yanking him upright again.

"Dean, really?" Sam asked, but his tone betrayed him as more concerned than annoyed. Benny had crossed his path earlier in the evening and filled him in on the Ruby situation, and the Lisa one as well.

"'m'sorry man," Dean mumbled, surprisingly sincere through his inebriation. "Leas' I didn't fuck up m'speech..."

Sam patted Dean's shoulder, simultaneously telling Dean that he wasn't angry, and to stop talking. "Gonna have to get you home before you do something to embarrass yourself, bro."

"No, no..." Dean slurred, waving his hand in semi-angry dismissal.

"Yes, yes. The party's winding down anyways; there's only two more hours to go. And you are going to be a massive asshole tomorrow if you don't sleep this off."

"Up yours, bitch."

"Eat me, jerk. Come on, on your feet."

"I'll take care of this," Bobby said, batting Sam away. "You go enjoy the rest of your party. I don't want this sloppy bastard throwing up on you; that tux wasn't cheap."

Sam put his hands up and backed away. "Case made."

"I'll go with you, too," Castiel said, pushing his chair back and grabbing his crutches.

"You sure? You shouldn't have to miss out."

"It's fine. I can't exactly join in the festivities." To illustrate his point, Castiel gracelessly hauled himself to his one good foot and fiddled with his crutches. "I think I should traverse that path between here and your home before it gets too dark, in any case. Dean is in no fit state to carry me over what he assured me was dangerous terrain, as he did last night."

"He carried you to the house?" Sam repeated.

"Yes."

"...Huh." Sam's facial expression remained nondescript, but the light revealed a somewhat devilish glint in his eyes.

"If we're done talkin' 'bout me..." Dean muttered.

"Shaddup, Drinky," Bobby said, swatting Dean's head lightly before crouching slightly and bracing Dean for being hoisted to his feet. "Upsy-daisy..."

It took longer than initially calculated for Bobby, Dean, and Castiel to make it home.
First there was the crowd to get through, plus the people who called out either oblivious good-byes or concerned well-wishes for Dean's recovery and needed to be responded to.

Once outdoors, Dean proved that he was not only a sloppy drunk, but a clumsy one, and a heavy one as well. Castiel thought, with slightly dark amusement, that perhaps Bobby, in being the one to support Dean—who had just slipped out of Bobby's grasp to lean over and pull up some dead grass from the ground—was more handicapped than Castiel himself.

Then he nearly went flying over an exposed root, and resolved to concentrate on his own ambulation.

Bobby dropped his keys on the living room floor once they made it into the house, not having the presence of mind to place them in the drawer of the coffee table that set next to the couch in his endeavor to get Dean into the bathroom. When Castiel finagled himself onto the sofa, he reached one of his crutches out, hooking the base around the key ring, and dragged the keys toward him.

"Splash some cold water on your face and get your head together," he heard Bobby chastise Dean, followed by the click of the bathroom door shutting and a loud, aggravated sigh. "Sorry you had to deal with that," Bobby said, coming around the side of the couch. Castiel held up the keys to indicate he had them; Bobby motioned for Castiel to throw the keys to him, which he did. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. And don't worry about it. Dean, that is. It doesn't bother me." Castiel settled back, taking in his surroundings; the TV remote was easily within reach. "Are you heading back over now?"

"In a few. Truth be told I'm lookin' forward to this party ending." Bobby took a few steps forward, coming to sit on the opposite end of the couch from Castiel. "There're too many people over there. Ellen, now, she's good with crowds; you gotta be when you run a restaurant. But she ain't exactly a social butterfly, and I'm worse than her. I can handle maybe five people at once, and that's it."

"I empathize. I prefer quieter and...more isolated pursuits, as well."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. My siblings inform me that I don't have the best people skills, and I agree with them."

"Well, now, you gotta be okay with people if you're springing them from captivity."

"That's different," Castiel said. "That's not so much social finesse as it is neglecting to panic."

"Still. Figure they gotta trust you something huge, so there's gotta be something there for 'em to connect to."

"I suppose," Castiel said, fiddling with a pull in the fabric of the couch.

Bobby coughed and shifted, bracing himself. A heavy silence hung between them until Bobby coughed again.

"Got a question for ya, Cas."

"I'll answer to the best of my ability."

"In the line of duty--your whole rescue vigilante business--v'you ever heard of a guy called John Winchester?"
"I can't say that I have."

"How about a kid called Adam Milligan?"

Castiel's breath very nearly caught in his throat. He recoiled slightly, feeling a handful of heartbeats that pounded in his chest like a judge's gavel, and in the moment it took him to breathe again he admonished himself that God-fearing people do not lie.

"Yes."

They just might not share all the details.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No." Castiel shook his head, tightly, controlled. "But I...I know that he is a missing child. And I am looking for him. Among others."

"Good." Bobby looked down at his hands; his thumbs had begun twiddling together. "Adam's...I know Adam's father. We were buds, back in the day. We ain't that close anymore, but still. I wanna see him get his kid back."

"I do too," Castiel said quietly.

If Bobby was going to say any more, he was cut off by the sound of loud retching.

"Oh, balls." Bobby got to his feet immediately and hurried towards the bathroom.

Castiel twisted in his seat to watch Bobby yank open the door. After a moment, he heard "Dean Harvelle, you flippin' idjit, what the hell'd you eat that grass for?" drifting out from the bathroom.

"Was either throw up now or throw up later," Dean mumbled, resting his head against the side of the toilet, from whence came the smell of booze, meat, and greenery mixed with intestinal juices. "'s'way my stomach du'n't hurt anymore..."

Bobby would have doubled back in laughter if he hadn't been rendered flabbergasted. "Kid, you are the dumbest genius I've ever met."

"Thanks..."

Bobby stepped forward and flushed the toilet; Dean winced at what intoxication rendered as an overly loud noise. "Come on, let's get you settled, you little shit."

Dean missed the first few times he tried to grab Bobby's hand, and made a little noise of victory when he finally got it. Bobby rolled his eyes and pulled Dean onto his feet and through the door, almost marching him into the living room.

"Is everything okay?" Castiel asked.

"Yeah. Dean here made himself throw up so he wouldn't have to deal with an upset stomach."

"I'm the dumbest genius, whoo..." Dean cheered under his breath.

"That does show astounding presence of mind for being intoxicated," Castiel acknowledged.

"Don't compliment him; he'll pull this shit again," Bobby muttered, walking Dean around the couch and then pushing him so he sat down.
Castiel watched Bobby pull a lever on the side of couch, kicking out a footstool for Dean. Dean had settled himself on the recliner aspect of the couch by the time Bobby returned from a quick sojourn upstairs to get the blanket from Dean's bed, which he now awkwardly threw over Dean's body.

"You mind keepin' an eye on him, Cas?" Bobby asked, while Dean clumsily tried to arrange his blanket comfortably.

"Not at all."

"Thanks. Take my phone, call the Roadhouse if you need us." Bobby set his phone down on the coffee table. "Fridge is yours, TV's yours. Be back in a couple hours."

"All right."

"Sleep it off, Dean. Thanks again, Cas."

Bobby had been gone for a few minutes and Castiel was just about to turn on the television when he heard Dean half-whisper "Sorry for gettin' hammered on you."

"It's quite all right." Castiel set the remote down. "I was perfectly okay with leaving the party early."

"I'm a...I'm a lousy drunk."

"It's fine, Dean."

"No, I am," Dean insisted, like a churlish teenager. "Lousiest drunk ever."

"You should meet some of my brothers," Castiel said, attempting humor. "They would not be as articulate as you are now."

"Stop tryin'ta make me look good," Dean whined, turning over onto his side so he faced Castiel. Good God but Dean's face was bright red. "I am the literal worst, Cas."

"Shhh."

"No no no. I am actually, in fact, the best at being the worst. And I am lotsa different kindsa worsts, Cas."

"Please stop."

"One! Worst possible mate." Dean had held up a finger, but it wilted as his body, seemingly of its own accord, began sinking down the back of the couch. "Two! Worst potential dad. And numero tres: worst fucking drunk. Who the fuck has to leave their kid brother's wedding because they imbibed, seriously..."

"Dean..."

Dean had slumped completely, curled up uncomfortably as he lay across the couch, his head on the middle cushion several inches away from Castiel's leg. "I just...I suck, Cas. Can't do shit for Sammy. Can't do shit for Lisa'n'Ben. Can't do shit except eat grass and throw up."

Unbidden, Castiel's hand descended to rest on the side of Dean's head, and he would have marveled at his boldness had he not been focused on Dean. "That is not true."
"'S'it is."

"Dean." His hand slipped a little lower, lightly covering Dean's mouth. "Shush."

To his eternal surprise, Dean did just that.

"I have known you for approximately twenty-four hours now, Dean," Castiel said, trying to modulate his voice into something less stern; he could practically hear Gabriel chiding him that he was laying the Alpha on too thickly. He pulled his hand away from Dean's mouth. "During that time you have assisted me in getting around on several occasions, even carrying me when you believed it too risky for me to walk. You have taken two strangers out to get much-needed clothes, and paid for them yourself. You provided breakfast for those same strangers, as well as your sister. And you saw to it that someone was there to watch out for your brother while you were helping to make sure his wedding ran smoothly. That is extremely far from being "the literal worst". In less than a day you have proven yourself to be highly industrious and exceedingly thoughtful. And frankly, anyone who thinks you would make a terrible mate and father is so mistaken that were they to say it out loud, I'd think they were trying to make a joke."

"...Shit, Cas," Dean finally stuttered out, after a second of stunned silence. "I...shit."

Castiel wasn't sure of how to continue after that, so his unformed words translated themselves into motion, and the hand that had covered Dean's impossibly soft lips began to awkwardly pat at his hair. It made him appreciate Tanya's much longer tresses, for those times after choir rehearsal when she curled up against him on the piano bench and asked to be petted and sung to. He'd done it for her when he first found her, sick and scared and criminally neglected in the house of a woman who had no business raising a child, and even though she was sixteen now and should be too old for such things, she still hurt too much to care.

"'Cha hummin', Cas?" Dean asked softly, straining to hear if he could make out proper words despite the disorientation coloring his perception.

"Nothing." He hadn't even realized that he'd begun making noise.

"Are you sure? 'Cause Mr. Fizzles can sense when you're being a li~ar~," Dean said in high-pitched singsong.

Castiel neglected to comment on what was obviously an inside joke beyond his current understanding of this particular pack's dynamics. "It's a...not quite a hymn. But it is a religious song. Some of my kids--the rescue kids--like it. It encourages them."

Dean wasn't much for religious music. Sometimes Bobby threw on an old gospel album, usually to mark the anniversary of his mother's passing, but aside from that the Harvelles didn't play the stuff, and singing God's glory was strictly regulated to those Christmases and Easters when they went to church and it was awkward to be the only ones not singing tonelessly along to the hymns.

"I wanna hear it."

"It won't sound that good."

"I wanna hear it," Dean repeated. "You cheated me out of hearin' you last night, Cas. Been wonderin' what you sound like ever since."

Dean seemed to realize how dirty that sounded, and he waggled his eyebrows in a silly imitation of seduction. Castiel could all but hear Balthazar laughing hysterically, and he blushed as he might have had his younger brother been physically present.
"You probably won't remember it in the morning."

"Ca~s. I wanna hear it." Had his foot been touching the floor, Dean would have stomped it.

"All right, all right, you win," Castiel said, exasperated in his flustered state. He held himself uncomfortably rigid for a second, drudging up the words and a comfortable pitch and the right headspace to pull the song off to any effect, and allowed himself a few throat-clearing coughs to stall for time.

"Days will come when you don't have the strength / And all you hear is you're not worth anything / Wondering if you ever could be loved / And if they truly saw your heart, they'd see too much / You're beautiful, you're beautiful / You are made for so much more than all of this / You're beautiful, you're beautiful / You are treasured, you are sacred, you are His / You're beautiful."

At this point Tanya would lay her head on his shoulder and start singing along, maybe attempt a harmony or at least take it up the octave, anything that would make her feel the slightest bit active.

"I'm praying that you have the heart to fight / 'Cause you are more than what is hurting you tonight / For all the lies you've held inside so long / They are nothing in the shadow of the cross / You're beautiful, you're beautiful / You are made for so much more than all of this / You're beautiful, you're beautiful / You are treasured, you are sacred, you are His / You're beautiful."

He inhaled, preparing for the key change. "Before you ever took a breath / Long before the world began / Of all the wonders He possessed / There was one more precious / Of all the earth and skies above / You're the one He madly loves / Enough to die."

He brought his voice down on the high note, self-conscious even though there was none to hear him except Dean, and from the way Dean's breathing had evened out it seemed like he hadn't an audience anymore. Nevertheless... "You're beautiful, you're beautiful / In His eyes."

Castiel hummed the next several measures of the song, not quite remembering how the freeform went, before his hand, which had come up in his passion for the song, drifted back down to land on the side of Dean's head once more.

"You're beautiful, you're beautiful / You are made for so much more than all of this / You're beautiful, you're beautiful / You are treasured, you are sacred, you are His."

"Want me to help with that?"

Sam's voice drifted softly in through the bathroom doorway behind Jess, where she stood in nothing but her bra and panties, looking into the mirror, a tube of lotion in her hand.

Jess inhaled deeply. The reception had petered to a close as guests drifted out the door to go home or to a hotel. Ellen and Bobby and Lenore, and even Eli, had shooed them away when they made to help with the clean-up; Ezra pinched her cheek and slapped her rump and told her to go enjoy her wedding night. Her dress hung neatly off the back of the bathroom door; she had taken down her hair and brushed her teeth and now she just needed to moisturize her scars and burn marks before going to bed.

The coolants she had popped before the ceremony were wearing off.
"Sure," she breathed, nearly croaked out.

Sam slipped inside the room, kissing her shoulder before reaching around to take the lotion out of her hand. He had stripped down to his underwear too; she felt the warmth and definition of his chest when he pressed up against her back, and her eyes fluttered a bit of their own accord.

"Is there any wrong way to do this?" Sam asked, studying the tube. Jess had always taken care of this by herself.

"Not really. I mean, you don't want to put on too much because it would be goopy, and you don't wanna press too hard because it'd hurt, but aside from that..."

"All right." A small pile of lotion went from the tube to Sam's fingertips to the back of Jess's shoulder, and she winced. "You okay?"

"Cold."

"Yeah?" Sam's hand snaked around, and he daubed the tip of her nose with a small bit of lotion.

"You dork," Jess giggled, reaching up to smear the creamy substance over one side of her face.

Sam responded with a kiss to the shell of Jess's ear and a hand that began rubbing lotion down the side of her arm. She took a moment to bask in the part-vigorous, part-gentle movement before deciding that maybe it was worth ruining the moment to ask. "Did Ruby show up at the house today?"

Sam arrested his movement for a second, before applying more moisturizer to his fingertips and returning to his task. "Yes. How'd you know?"

"I heard Lindsay and Max talking about smelling sulfur."

"She left me a bag of demonblood to mess with me. Personally I think it's fake, because it'd be way too easy for her to get caught if it's real. But in any case Benny held onto it for me, and he passed it on to Jody tonight. She's taking it for testing. I'm probably gonna have to talk to the cops tomorrow before Thanksgiving dinner."

"Okay," Jess said tightly, bobbing her head.

"I wasn't going to keep it a secret from you."

"I know." Jess's smile in the mirror was weak but reassuring. With his dry hand Sam lifted her hair away from her neck and planted a grateful kiss just above the clasp of her collar; he grinned, inwardly and outwardly, at the soft noise and sway of her body that followed.

"So I think the ceremony went over well," Sam said conversationally, swiping cream on her neck.

"More than well."

"That speech you gave was incredible." His hand ran down her back, thoughtlessly as his mind was given wholly over to complimenting her; he only noted the movement when she shivered in response to it.

"Thank you," Jess said, ducking her head and blushing, because of his praise or his actions or both, she didn't know. "I really wanted you to...appreciate it, I guess."

"I did." She froze, just a little, and shut her eyes; Sam's fingers were working the clasps of her bra.
"You were magnificent today, Jess," he breathed into her ear when he had unhooked all three; with a pull to one side of the backband he dragged the off-white, slightly lacy piece of underwear off her torso and let it fall softly to the floor. "More so than usual, of course."

Jess felt slightly uncomfortable looking at herself in the mirror but drawn to do it all the same. In its strange way it was mesmerizing to watch Sam's fingers work the lotion into her skin, starting at her the bottom of her stomach, sliding up her ribs, and then arranging themselves to massage under and around her breast. His other arm snaked around her hips, pulling her flush against him.

"You okay?"

"Mmhmm," Jess intoned, a hand drifting up to brush against his face, before compulsively burying itself in his hair and taking hold of the back of his head. An appreciative noise bubbled up from Sam's throat and he buried his face at the back of her neck, kissing and the nipping at whatever skin above or below her collar that he could reach. Her grip on his head tightened; it held her up when his thumb unexpectedly brushed over her nipple and her knees went instantly weak.

It went on like that for a handful of minutes that passed by too slow and too quickly at the same time; Sam spreading a thin layer of lotion over her body, starting at a lower and lower point each time until finally he was slipping his hand between her thighs, gently squeezing her leg before running his hand back up. He was enjoying how it was becoming very difficult very quickly for Jess, whose breathing had gone heavy, to support her own weight, and in a moment of playfulness he hadn't touched upon in months he quickly arranged it so he sat down on the closed toilet and she faced him, her abdomen level with his face.

"You little--"

"Sh-sh-sh-sh," Sam said, pressing a finger against his lips and looking at her beseechingly. "You gotta let me finish before we can go to bed."

Jess shifted her weight, rolling her eyes, but planted her feet once that was over and bent slightly to rest her hands on Sam's shoulders. Sam thought for a moment about how he'd like to proceed, and after an additional few seconds of making sure his nerve wouldn't fail, he hooked a few of his dry fingers around the sides of her panties and pulled them down.

Jess's heart thudded loudly and palpably in her chest but she swallowed and made no move to protest; she didn't think she wanted to. When her underwear reached her ankles she assisted in removing them completely, balancing on the balls of either foot while she kicked the panties away with the other. She was rewarded with Sam pressing a kiss against her stomach, near the border where burnt skin met unmarred skin, before he dutifully loaded his fingers with lotion and set to work moisturizing her leg.

He moved maddeningly slowly; using both hands to wrap around her upper thigh and then sliding them all the way down to her toes for the first few times. He switched to one hand after a few repetitions, using his now free hand to take hold of her other leg and nudge it away. Still, he only used that opportunity to wipe more accurately at the inner thigh of Jess's burnt leg. Anticipation mixed with Jess's tiredness and how soothing the massage had become, and Jess lightly shut her eyes to help her process it all, which was why she didn't expect it when Sam, in one fluid motion, pressed his mouth against her vulva and slid his tongue up between her inner labia.

The surprise made her squeak loudly and she would have stumbled back were it not for Sam quickly grabbing her hips to steady her. She whined at him, both admonishing and needy, and he did it again, this time angling his tongue so it hooked up and pressed against her clitoris. Her hands went from his shoulders to his head, gripping his hair as she tried to balance herself while he
repeated his actions. The fifth or sixth time he did it he didn't stop, but glided a trail up her mons, her stomach, between her ribs and along her sternum, over her collar bone, skipping over the small place covered by her wedding collar before finally stopping where her neck took a sharp turn into becoming her jaw.

"I'm gonna finish getting ready," Sam breathed against her throat, his hands pulling at the small of her back. "Go wait for me?"

Jess swallowed, moistening a throat that had gone dry, and dropped a quick kiss on his head. "Okay."

Her footsteps felt nimble and almost bouncy as she left the bathroom. At the doorway to their bedroom she stopped short, the air in her body suddenly dissipating, and she caught the door jamb with her hand, inhaling deeply and exhaling shakily. The two seconds of breathlessness seemed to take a huge chunk of her strength away, but she shook it off, and went inside.

By the time Sam had brushed his teeth, splashed on something good-smelling, discarded his remaining clothing, and slipped into the bedroom, Jess was sitting up in the middle of bed, her legs curled in front of her, one hand planted to the side of her leg and the other in between them, her hair artfully arranged to make her look inviting. Her pose was quickly undone after Sam sat on the bed and pulled her into another kiss, which transformed into him pressuring her to lie down and settling himself on top of her.

Jess stretched her arms out and then wrapped them around his neck, and then suddenly had no idea what to do with her legs. In her head she almost laughed, remembering how it'd been when she was a virgin and armed only with Dean's posturing stories and movie love scenes to tell her what actually was supposed to happen during sex. Sadness colored her amusement when it crossed her mind that maybe it had been so long that her body had forgotten what to do.

Sam's body hadn't, though, and while Jess pondered, he took action, maneuvering his body so he balanced on his elbows, his hands cupping her breasts and his face buried in her neck, and stretched his legs out behind him, sandwiched between hers, aligning their hips.

The moment Jess felt him hard against her, a strange little spasm ran through her pelvic floor. It was neither painful nor arousing. It felt like the closing of automatic doors.

His hands took her mind off the weird sensation. Her breasts were wildly sensitive and Sam certainly remembered it. She almost caught the proud little smirk on his face when he began kneading them like a kitten sans claws, all while licking up that one spot on her neck that somehow made her breathing pick up and her hips jerk in pleasure. It disappeared from view completely when he arched back slightly, placing one of his hands protectively, possessively, on the curve of her waist, and replacing it with his mouth.

The noise she made was almost embarrassing. Unthinkingly her legs clamped around the small of his back, hooking themselves together by the ankles.

Sam pulled his knees in so he crouched over her, redistributing his weight but not letting go of her. She shifted after he settled, trying to keep herself open to him. It helped when his tongue flicked around and then over her nipple and it sent such a delightful little shock through her that she arched, and Sam took the opportunity to line himself up and begin to push inside.

"Babe?"

"Ye-...yes?" Her eyes, which had squinted shut, cracked open.
"You okay?"

"...yeah. Yeah, why?"

"Because I can't, um..." Sam searched for a delicate way to phrase it. "I can't...get in."

"What?" Maybe she really had forgotten what it was supposed to be like, because she felt pretty full, to the point where it had become a little uncomfortable. She propped herself on her elbows, peering between her and Sam's bodies to try to get a better look. He was right; he was only partway sheathed. "Am I too dry? Is that what's wrong?"

"No, it's not that...here." Sam put his hands on her legs and gently pushed them apart; her feet unwound themselves from each other and then planted on the mattress, creating a wider opening. "We'll try this." He leaned forward, catching her up in a kiss to reintroduce the mood, and stroked her inner thighs with his thumbs as he held them apart and tried sliding forward.

Jess broke the kiss with a yelp of "Ow!" and a full-body wince.

"Shit."

"What? What is it?"

Sam tried to give her an it's okay smile but it came out more like a sympathetic grimace. "You're...you're too tight, baby."

"Just how I like it. What a good little bitch. So nice and tight for me."

"I'm..." Jess's lip quivered a little bit as she tried to speak cogently. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"You can try again--"

"It's fine," Sam said, a little too breezily, and Jess's face and heart fell. "We can do something else." He planted a quick, unreciprocated kiss on her lips and then backed down, arranging himself so that he could slip his much softer, more flexible tongue inside of her instead.

She jerked on contact, away rather than towards. Sam hesitated and then tried again; she stayed still this time. Too still. He redoubled his efforts, to no avail. He glanced up; Jess's lower lip was sucked in and held between her teeth.

"Honey..."

Her hand came down abruptly, taking hold of his forehead and pushing his face away. He crawled backwards instantly, just in time to avoid Jess closing her legs, rolling onto her side, and hiding her face in the pillow.

Sam waited for a long minute, watching as one of Jess's hands gripped the side of the mattress until her fingers went red, and then carefully crawled around to the other side of the bed and put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay, Jess."

"No, it's not!" Jess shouted, her voice muffled against the pillow.

"Baby..." Sam pulled on her shoulder, tugging her back a few times until he finally coaxed her into
turning over and revealing her red, wet face. To his crestfallen look she tried to give a smile; it
dissolved into a sniffle, and then a sob. "Hey, hey, hey..." Sam adjusted himself so he sat
against the headboard, and drew her, half-sitting up, into his arms. "It's okay," he breathed into her
hair, kissing her in the same spot. "It's okay."

"I'm sorry," Jess mumbled, wiping at her eyes. "It wasn't you. I promise."

"It's all right." Without thinking about it he began rocking gently back and forth, his hand coming
up to cup her chin. "You don't have to apologize." He glanced down at the blankets folded at the
foot of the bed, and narrowed his eyes at them until one of them unfolded itself and snaked up the
mattress, stopping when the top was at Jess's shoulder.

It took a several minutes for Jess to calm down, gulping air and trying to sniffle back tears and snot
that dripped down her face all the while. She shuddered once it felt like she had control over
herself again, and hunkered down into the blanket for warmth.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Sam asked gently.

Her hands flailed, frustratedly. "I just...I panicked."

"Tell me about it?" Sam asked, trying to sound as though she would be doing him a favor by
answering.

Jess inhaled shakily, exhaled slightly more steadily. "When you said I was too tight, it just...it just
made me think of something he said." She squared her shoulders, tightening in on herself. "And
that's not your fault, okay? That's on me. I just couldn't...get past it."

Sam fought the urge to argue with her assignation of responsibility to herself, choosing instead to
run his fingers through her hair, gently untangling a knot that had formed in some strands. "Were
you okay before that?"

"Yes. Oh my God yes, Sam, you were amazing. I don't know why I couldn't...everything started so
good, and..." Her eyes began welling up again. "I just felt really...really stupid and embarrassed
when I couldn't. And then he moved into my head and wouldn't leave, and I just started to feel
so...fuck." She choked; three more tears fell from her eyes. "Just so stupid and useless and dirty,
and I couldn't keep going. I'm sorry, Sam. I'm so sorry."

"Jess," Sam said, squeezing her as if he were trying to pull her inside of him, to the warmth and
safety of his soul, "you have nothing to be sorry for." He pressed his face into the side of her head,
mouth fumbling over his words. "I know...I know what it is you're feeling, baby. And I know that
it feels like its going to last forever, but it's not. I promise you. This is going to end and we're going
to be okay."

"...Sam?"

When Sam didn't respond, Jess sat up, the blanket slipping down and over as she twisted her body
to face him. Even though she had moved, his head stayed bowed, eyes glued to the sheets below
them.

"Sam?" she tried again, wiping a few stray tears and wet trails from her cheeks and then using her
damp fingers to tilt his head up, to look him in the eyes. "Baby?"

Sam's hand came up to take Jess's wrist. It took him a moment of holding it, steeling himself, to
speak.
"Jess, there's something I need to tell you."

Chapter End Notes

The songs for this chapter are "Come To Me" by The GooGoo Dolls (the title of this chapter is taken from the song) and "Beautiful" by MercyMe. They can be heard at http://8tracks.com/honeysempai/the-first-and-the-last along with the other songs thus far featured in this fic.

You'll find out all about Sam, no worries. It'll just be awhile.
Family

Chapter Notes

 Lots of infodump this time around, but I promise most of it will come up later. Also it facilitates DeanCas bonding, so.

 Frig it, I like scenes where people just talk at each other. No apologies. I REGRET NOTHING.

 I'm using Raphael's female incarnation for this fic, and feminized the name accordingly.

 The softly bright light of the sun drifting in through the window was what pried Dean's eyes open. A part of him was still dizzy and headache-y and it took him a few seconds to blink away his blurry vision and recognize that he was not in his bedroom, and moreover, there was definitely someone else there.

 "Cas?" Dean groaned. "The hell...?"

 "Good morning."

 "Where the fuck am I?"

 "The guest room."

 "...and why am I in the guest room, Cas?"

 "How much do you remember about last night?"

 "Um..." Dean rubbed his temples. "I think there was a party. I know there was alcohol."

 "You got drunk. Your...father? Uncle?"

 "Jus' call him Bobby."

 "All right. Bobby brought you back to the house, and I accompanied you. You fell asleep on the couch. You woke up when your family came home, and you...well...insisted on getting into a "proper bed". But you were still very disoriented, and most likely could not make it up the stairs, so we put you in this room because the bed was spacious enough for both of us. Does any of this ring a bell?"

 "Urgh..." Dean moved from his temples to his closed eyes, trying to rub some memory of the event into his brain. "I honestly don't remember shit..."

 "Nothing?"

 "I'm tryin'..."

 Try as he might, no recollection came, but while he was running through what few memories he had of the reception, some other thought struck him instead, one that sent an icy bolt of fear
through his body and yanked him upright, blood rushing to his face and turning him an unnatural shade of red.

"Did you fuck me?"

"...I'm sorry?"

"You heard me," Dean spat, his self-awareness racing to see if he was still wearing everything that he'd had on last night. No tie, no shoes, no belt, no jacket; everything else seemed accounted for, but that in itself meant nothing. "Did. You. Fuck. Me."

"This is ridiculous."

"You had better ("Dean.") start running right the fuck ("Dean.") now if you did, asshole. I have mauled bigger perverts than you--"

"Dean!" The loud bark of an Alpha forced Dean to flinch back, his mouth instantly shutting, and he hated himself for it. "Nothing happened between you and I. Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?"

"Exactly. If we did anything—if I did anything to you—you would smell it. You would probably feel it, also. And beyond that," Castiel lifted his crutches slightly and brought them back to the floor with an angry-sounding click, "I am not exactly in a position where I could be having sex with anybody, non-consensually or not."

Castiel’s logic lodged itself into Dean’s fear-soaked brain, dispelling the panic and replacing it with humiliation. The red in his face faded into a dark pink to reflect its newer purpose.

"S-...sorry, man."

“I rescue children from people who do exactly what you just accused me of doing, Dean,” Castiel said, through clenched teeth.

“I know, I know.” Dean slapped his hands against his face. The adrenaline rush was fading away, and the headache gleefully returned in its stead. "Not for nothing Cas, it's just that, in my experience, Alphas don't drag shitfaced Omegas to bed just to tuck 'em in, you know?”

“...I understand,” Castiel said, his offended glare softening as personal insult gave way to compassion. “I apologize. Of course that is something that would...be of concern to you.”

“Yeah, well. Keep it in mind next time,” Dean mumbled.

“I will,” Castiel said, earnestly. "And I swear to you that I did nothing untoward.”

“Yeah, I believe you.” Dean sat down again, hard, on the bed and flopped backwards. He realized a second later that he was showing his belly, and hastily he flipped over onto his side. "Sorry for screaming at you. And for being a drunken asshole last night."

"No need." Castiel shifted uncomfortably on his crutches. "Are you hungry? Your family is eating a late breakfast."

Dean groaned. "Oh man. I am not gonna make it through breakfast with everyone." Just the thought of it hurt.

“All right. But you are hungry?"
“Yeah…” Dean drawled, steeling himself to get up.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Wait, Cas—”

But Castiel had already disappeared into the hallway, and Dean did not have the will nor the energy to go chasing after him. Instead he rolled over again, onto his other side, to shield his eyes from the light streaming in through the window.

It scared him, a little—okay, a lot—to think about if Castiel had been the type to take advantage. Dean was strong, John had made sure of that, and fast and agile too. But he had also been plastered, and in that state his biological handicap would be extremely pronounced. People had tried to get him drunk before, even as an adolescent, for that exact reason.

It wasn’t like Dean was going to avoid drinking—fuck if the knotheads of the world were going to take that from him—but this was the first time in awhile that he’d gotten fall-down drunk, and… well, thankfully Castiel wasn’t the type.

How fitting, though, that one Alpha had set him up to be prey for another, however unintentionally.

The door creaked open and Castiel reappeared, a medium-sized baggie clasped in either hand against the handles of the crutches.

"Your...Ellen told me that she's giving you two hours to recover before you have to be a "productive human being".""

"Fair," Dean conceded, reaching out to take one of the bags from Castiel. He picked himself up and moved over a few inches, allowing Castiel to sit beside him, and opened up his bag. "Oh, Aunt Ellen and/or Uncle Bobby, whoever cooked, you wonderful person," he said, inhaling so hard that he tilted his head back. "Deep-fried venison bacon. I am unworthy."

"Deep-fried venison bacon?"

"What, you've never had it? You haven't lived, man."

"With few exceptions, my family is comprised of health nuts. I don't think I've eaten anything "deep-fried" in my entire life."

"Well, you're having it now." Dean held his hand, and the bag, out to Castiel.

"I'm okay with these," Castiel said, holding up the other bag, which was filled with bilberries.

"Nuh-uh. You will eat your greasy heart attack in a bag and you will like it."

Castiel snorted. "Yes, Alpha."

“Bite me,” Dean muttered good-humoredly, though he suddenly found himself averting his gaze, to avoid meeting Castiel’s eyes. Shyly. Fuck.

“I suppose I ought to acclimate myself to this type of food now, since I presume there will be more of it for dinner,” Castiel said, semi-reluctantly sticking his hand in the bag and drawing out a strip of bacon.

"Mmm, there might be some fancy stuff left over from the wedding, but yeah, this is what we'd normally have. We are about as lower-middle-class as you can get around here, and we like it."
Castiel made an acknowledging noise, and then turned a suspicious eye on the piece of bacon in his hand. Dean watched, grinning, as Castiel nibbled on the strip; his expression didn’t quite make clear if he liked it and didn’t want to admit it, or didn’t like but didn’t want to appear rude.

"So health nuts, huh?"

"Mostly. Gabriel is a sugar fiend, and Balthazar...does what he wants, though he'd go more for gourmet decadence than fast food."

"Prissy guy?"

"...In some respects. Though you might think all of us to be prissy."

"Yeah?" Castiel nodded, placing a few bilberries in his mouth. "Tell me about your family."

Castiel swallowed. "Why?"

"'Cause I'm curious and we've got two hours to kill. Why, you don't like talking about them?"

"No, I'm perfectly comfortable with discussing them. It is just as I told you yesterday, my father had thirteen children, and many of us have our own families as well."

"Cas, seriously, go for it. Like I said, we’ve got time."

"All right." Cas set the bag of bilberries on his lap. "I suppose I'll start at the top. My father is Charles Shurley, colloquially known as Chuck. Founder and former CEO of Heartland Prophet, Inc, which he built from the ground up; now retired. His first wife, my half-siblings' mother, was Eve. She is still alive and I've seen her a few times, but I've never spoken to her directly. Their first two children were twins, Michael and Lucifer. Michael married a woman named Raphaela, and they have two sons, Virgil and Thaddeus; both adopted. You are already acquainted with Lucifer's family."

"Well, with Meg and Ruby, at least."

"Those are his two youngest daughters. His oldest children are triplets, one girl and two boys: Abaddon, Alastair, and Azazel."

"Alastair?"

"You know him?"

"I...might have met him at some point," Dean said, recovering. It occurred to him that he had never learned Alastair's last name. "Our age? Blonde-ish brown hair? Shady?" Understatement.

"That does describe him."

Oh the tangled fucking webs we weave... "So, wait," Dean said, hoping he could effectively roadblock Castiel from asking more questions about Dean's relationship to Alastair, "why are they Masters and not Shurleys? Lucifer a Beta or something?"

"No, he and his wife are both Alphas. Lucifer is merely...well, Lucifer."

"Problem child?"

"You could put it that way. I've never actually gotten to know him that well. He left home the year I was born. From what Gabriel has told me, he and Michael were extremely close but also polar
opposites. If I may steal from the Bible—"

“Pretty sure that’s a double sin, Cas,” Dean said, with a smirk.

“—Lucifer is the prodigal son, and Michael is the faithful one,” Castiel continued, his eyes giving Dean a look equivalent to a stuck-out tongue. “And neither Father nor Michael took it that well when at the tender age of 17 Lucifer bred an older woman.”

Dean whistled.

"I'll say this on behalf of Lucifer's honor, he did marry Lilith. He also took her name, as a...symbolic middle finger, to my father."

"What's his damage?"

Castiel shrugged. "Gabriel says the trouble started when Eve and my father divorced, and it just blossomed from there. I grew up alongside Lucifer's children more than Lucifer himself, though, so honestly I don't really know."

"Fair enough. So Gabriel's...?"

"Gabriel is the third oldest of my siblings. He's fifteen years older than I am, not that you would know it by the way he acts. He’s who I was on the phone with the other night, and you will have the dubious pleasure of meeting him when he picks me up today."

"Such love you have for him."

"I do love my brother,” Castiel said, rolling his eyes affectionately. “He is just...a bit much. God bless his wife, I’ll put it that way."

"What’s his wife’s name?"

“Kali. Kali Chamunda. Gabriel is a Beta, so he took her name. And they have three children: Inias, Gail, and Eliah. They are also adopted. You’ll probably meet them today, too. They’re going to want to come with Daddy to pick up Uncle Cas.” Castiel’s eyes softened, and Dean could tell that though Castiel would be the type to deny it out of diplomacy, Gabriel’s kids were his favorites among the nieces and nephews.

"How come so many of the kids are adopted?"

"There are some medical issues involved. I don't really want to speak about it without permission..."

"No problem, that’s fair. Can I...?" Dean motioned for Castiel to offer him the bag of bilberries. "All right, so that's three of your siblings. You got nine more."

"Yes. Two years after Gabriel came Metatron. He’s the one who suggested I major in what I did. He is married, to Hael, and they have twins, Gadreel and Abner, who are not adopted. And a year after Metatron came Naomi. She is married to Crowley."

"Ick, that his first name?"

"No, I don't deign to call him by his first name."

"Whoa. Somebody doesn't like him."
"No one likes him. Least of all Naomi."

"That sucks. Why's she still married to him?"

"They have four sons."

"Oh, so the sex is good."

"...I do not particularly care to think of my sister engaging in relations with that man."

"Sorry."

"Anyway. They have Nathaniel, Esper and Ion who are twins, and Bartholomew."

"Lotsa twins."

"Multiple births run in my family. In any case, Eve left sometime after Naomi was born, and my father married my mother, Becky. Their first child was Anna, who followed Lucifer's example in running away from home as soon as she reached majority, though she married her husband before getting pregnant. His name is Caleb. They have, of course, twins: Ephraim and Muriel. You actually probably know of Anna, at least tangentially. She's currently our senator."

"Anna Milton, right?"

"Correct. Her husband is a Beta, but she took his last name. Again, symbolic middle finger."

"I think Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby voted for her."

"Did you?"

"Didn't vote."

"I see. Anyway, Anna has mostly reconciled with the rest of the family to varying extents. We see more of her than of Lucifer, in any case. So. A year after Anna came Zachariah. He does not much care for me. He is married to Hester, who also does not much care for me, and they have two boys, Malachi and Theo, who I can only assume will also grow up to not much care for me."

"Any reason why they don't like you...?"

Castiel shrugged. "Personality differences, I suppose. As you might have surmised, there are some schisms within the family, over various points of contention. We are close, but we have our differences. I think a smaller family might be easier to manage in that regard."

"Not necessarily," Dean said, a brief slideshow of the screaming matches between Sam and John running through his head.

"I suppose," Castiel said, wondering briefly if there had ever been any sort of falling-out within the Harvelle family. "Anyway. I was born four years after Zachariah, but my brother Joshua is actually older than I am. After Lucifer estranged himself, there was a gap that that I couldn't fill on my own. So my parents wound up adopting two foundlings who were already brothers: Joshua, who is three years older than I am, and Uriel, who is about three weeks younger than I. Five years after I was born, my mother had my sister Rachel, and then Samandriel two years after that. When I was thirteen they adopted Balthazar from England, though he's a year older than Rachel. No one born after Zachariah is married or has children, so that completes my immediate family tree."

"You seriously deserve an award for memorizing all that."
"It is a point of pride," Castiel said, almost allowing a smirk.

"So who're your favorites?" Castiel fixed him with a reproachful look. "Okay, who do you hang out most with? When you're not, you know, running all over creation rescuing kids. Gabriel, I'm assuming, since he's the one you called the other night."

"Out of all my older siblings I do rely on Gabriel and Joshua the most. I am...not close to Metatron and Naomi per se, but I see them more often than, say, Michael. I have a good relationship with Anna now, though this was not always the case. But it is actually my younger siblings that I am closest to. Uriel, Balthazar, Rachel, Samandriel, and I all live in the main house, with our parents, when they aren't traveling, which they currently are."

"Do they help you out with the whole rescuing gig? Anyone in your family, I mean."

"Joshua does; he's the one sheltering the children until they return home, or find one. Gabriel keeps tabs on me in case something happens. Everyone younger than I am knows what's going on, and I believe Anna does too, but I haven't told any of the others. They know, of course, that Joshua runs a shelter through the church, just not how the children get there."

"Why not?"

"My family is full of Alphas, Dean." Wasn't it strangely nice to hear those words tinged with a note of shame for once. "There are plenty of Betas, too, but they're protected in a lot of ways by our status. Type discrimination is not pressing concern for most of us. The only Omegas in the family are Balthazar and Samandriel, and one of Naomi's sons, Nathaniel. Naomi actually does get twitchy about anti-Omega sentiment, but somehow I doubt she'd approve of what I do. Her sympathy is somewhat limited to the immediate family."

"Ah." Dean chewed on another piece of bacon. "Welp. I don't know if it's any consolation, but us Harvelles, we're in your corner."

Castiel smiled. It was weak but, to Dean's mind, nonetheless brilliant. "Thank you, Dean. That does mean a good deal."

"No problem."

"Now, I believe this makes it your turn...?"

"Sorry?"

"I've told you about my family. I would like to hear about yours."

"That an order?" Dean raised his eyebrows.

"No, just a request." Castiel's fingers curled in embarrassment. "I apologize if it sounded like an order."

"Pushover." Dean wagged his finger at Castiel teasingly. "Some Alpha you are."

Castiel smiled at that. "I hear that often. From Crowley, mostly."

"Dude, Crowley sounds like a dickhead, and I have a strict policy about not taking dickheads seriously."

"Actually, I think he's partially right about me. I have a theory, that instead of Alpha, Beta, and
Omega being strictly separated categories, they’re more like points on a triangle.” In absence of pen and paper, Castiel opted to draw in the air with his finger. "So if there’s Alpha,” he indicated a dot, “Beta,” he pointed at a space downward and to the right of the first dot, “and Omega,” he indicated a third dot, in line with the second but further to the left of both the others, “you will have people who land squarely in each type, but you’ll also have people who exist here,” he waved his hand in the space between Alpha and Beta, “and here” his hand ran the line between Beta and Omega, “and even here,” he finished, finally gesturing in the space between Alpha and Omega. “So I may have been born an Alpha, but I can behave like an Omega in some respects. And you, as an Omega, can still have Alpha traits.”

“You think I got Alpha traits, Cas?” Dean almost, *almost*, batted his eyelashes. *Fuck.*

“Well, you’ve applied a nickname to me that I didn’t ask for,” Castiel said, with a smug smile, “and let’s not forget your rampage this morning.”

That made Dean’s face go a little pink. So much for having Alpha traits. “Probably just picked that up from my dad.”

“You mean Bobby?”

“No, my bio dad. Both my real parents are Alphas. We’ve got a mixed bloodline on both sides if you go back far enough, so it’s just that the gene pool dealt them some wild cards with me and Sam.”

"That's how it is with my family, as well. Naomi and Crowley, for instance, are both Alphas, but they have two Betas, an Alpha, and an Omega for sons." Dean bobbed his head in acknowledgement and took some bilberries; Castiel drummed his fingers against his leg. "So...you did live with your biological parents."

"Yeah, for basically my entire childhood. With my dad, at least. Mom died when I was four."

"How? If I may ask."

"Fire. Whole house went up."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You're not the one who started it."

"You think it was arson?"

"We know it was. And we spent the next twelve years trekking around America looking for the son of a bitch who lit the match. Then maybe three months or so before I turn seventeen, Dad leaves the hotel room, doesn't come back, and me and Sammy are on our own."

"What happened to your father?"

"No idea," Dean said, his arms folding compulsively, one leg agitatively bouncing without his say-so. "Never heard from him again. They presumed him dead so the adoption could go through."

"I'm sorry."

"Still not your fault."

"Isn't it unnecessarily pedantic to refuse to acknowledge that the phrase "I'm sorry" has a colloquial
meaning as an expression of sympathy?"

"Isn't it unnecessarily pedantic to use words like "pedantic"? And "colloquial"?"

"Actually, no, it's not. The word you're looking for is "pretentious"."  

Dean turned his gaze to Castiel's face, and when the deadpan expression didn't fade away, Dean snorted and checked the other man with his elbow. "You're okay, Cas."

"Thank you."

Dean reached into the bag of bilberries, took a handful, tossed one berry into the air, and caught it in his mouth. "So, yeah, anyway," he said, chewing at the same time, "Sammy and I end up at this shelter in New York State, and when they couldn't find my dad, we gave up and called Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby. I think I was maybe a month away from turning seventeen at that point, so they rushed through the adoption paperwork, and Sammy and I officially became Harvelles."

"So they knew your parents, I presume."

"Oldest friends. One of the few phone numbers Dad kept on hand."

"Why? Why did he not keep numbers, I mean."

"Well, my dad was..." Dean popped another few berries into his mouth before continuing "...he got pretty paranoid, after Mom died. Didn't make a ton of new friends. And he basically never spoke to my mom's people. I didn't even know I had relatives on her side until we came back to Lawrence. I think he thought that if they got close to me and Sammy at all, they'd take us away from him." He shoved the rest of his handful of fruit into his mouth, chewing and swallowing with a perhaps completely warranted vigor. "Pretty ironic if you think about it."

"Mmm." Castiel reached over, semi-hesitantly; Dean noticed, and offered up the bag of bacon for Castiel to more easily take from. "Was Charlie already here when you were adopted?"

"No, she came two years ago. Me and Sam go out to get milk, and we bring her back instead."

"Dean!" Ellen's voice floated in through the door as her fist knocked on it. "You taking a shower?"

"I thought I had two hours!" Dean yelled back. "Two hours was a courtesy. I can hear you two gossiping like old ladies in there, which means you're not hungover and you don't need the time."

"Promise is a promise!"

"I'm your mo--...I'm the head of household, my word is law. If you're showering you get an extra twenty minutes before I ask you to do anything. Take it or leave it."

"Fi~ne," Dean shouted, like a whiny child, and Castiel pressed his lips together to keep from smiling. Dean saw it, and gave him a sneer. "You showering too, Cas?"

"I already did."

"How?"

"With difficulty."
And there it was again, that earnest deadpan that caused a spontaneous jelly-like sensation to take over Dean's legs.

...Fuck.

Jess woke up to the sound of computer keys clicking. Like Dean it took her a moment to recall where exactly she was, but since she hadn't drank as much as he had, recollection came to her without Sam's aid.

Sam noticed she was up when he felt a cold, wet nose rub itself on his arm, followed by the long chin of a wolf's muzzle resting on his leg. He looked down to see Jess's soft brown eyes staring up at him; when she caught his eye her tail began to wag, moving her butt along with it.

"What are you doing, pretty girl, huh?" He settled his hand on her head, his arm draping along her neck. "Just being silly..."

In response, Jess hoisted herself onto her back legs, her front paws balancing on his leg, and began licking his cheek. Sam scrunched up his face as her tongue moved to cover his chin and nose and forehead, and when she got to his ear he laughed, squirming away from her while wrapping his arms around and squeezing the trunk of her body. She transformed back into a human under his touch, arranging herself so she sat comfortably in his lap.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sam."

"Mmm, good morning, Mr. Jess," she purred, nuzzling her head so it fit under his chin. "Whatcha looking at?"

"Oh, I...well," Sam swiveled the desk chair to let Jess have a better look at the computer screen. "I was thinking about...well, basically everything. I went and dug out my insurance info. They sent us this thing in the mail awhile ago that shows us how to look up doctors that are in our network, so that's what I did." He reached forward for the mouse, scrolling up and down to show Jess how extensive the list was. "Dean pointed out to me the other night that you're gonna be on our insurance now, so I figured that, once we get that squared away, you and I could start...you know, actually seeing a couple's therapist or something. You can get a new gynecologist, too, since your old one was such an asshole to you..."

"Okay," Jess said lightly. Her hand came up to stroke down his arm. "Um...babe?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for telling me."

"Well, you're my wife, Jess, you deserved to know. Honestly I should've told you sooner; I just felt..."

"...I know." Jess cuddled herself closer against him. "Am I the only one who knows about this?" she pressed gently.

"Yeah. I haven't told anyone else."

"Are you going to tell anyone else?"
She had begun to slip down his lap, and he adjusted them so she sat more securely. "Not yet," he said, once that was done.

"Not even Dean?"

"Definitely not Dean just yet," Sam said, with a sardonic half-laugh. "I don't think he'd handle it too well. I want to get into a better headspace *myself* before I lay that at his feet."

"Okay." Jess straightened out her back, bringing herself up taller so she could wrap her arms around his neck. "And, you know, baby...if what happened to me hadn't been so public, I might not have wanted to say anything, either. Not that mine really compares..."

"Shh." Sam pressed a finger to her lips. "I think we break even on the trauma front, babe."

"You were a kid."

"But I didn't almost die." He pulled his head back and lifted Jess's chin so they looked each other in the eyes. "We can both be hurt, babe. It's all right."

Jess craned her neck, making an all too willing captive of Sam's lips with her own. "I'm really glad I married you."

"Me too."

She dropped back down again, and Sam turned his head so his cheek lay upon her hair. The world afforded them a few minutes of comforting quiet, and they might have dozed off like had they not heard a muffled, unfamiliar male voice yelling "Hello?" from outside.

"Who on earth...?" Sam muttered, cracking an eye open.

"Hello?" the different voice called, and Sam stood, swooping Jess up into his arms as he did so. She gave a little giggly shriek at the movement, but she had quieted down by the time they reached the window, and she helpfully held back the curtains to let Sam peer down into the yard surrounding the Roadhouse.

"Anyone you know?" Jess asked.

"No..." Sam turned and set her down--they were pretty sure the angle at which the window was set allowed them to see out but not anyone to see in, but just in case, they didn't especially want anyone to catch a glimpse of Jess's naked body--and pulled open the window. A breeze brought up the scents of the crowd gathered below, revealing a telltale biological relationship.

"That's Cas's family," Sam said, before leaning out the window. "Hi!" He shouted towards the ground, catching the attention of the small group below. "We'll be right down!"

"I'll call the house to let them know," Jess said, as Sam stepped back and shut the window. "I'll come join you when I, you know," she looked down, "have clothes on."

"All right." Sam turned, pressed a short but somehow lingering kiss to her lips, and then jogged out of the bedroom, through the apartment and down the stairs. He threw open the door leading outdoors and was immediately greeted by a spray of confetti to the face.

"Oops, sorry," the guilty party said, not looking the least bit sheepish. "Thought Cas was gonna come out the door first and got a little trigger-happy."
"Where did you even hide that?" the woman by his side grumbled. "I thought I confiscated everything before we left the house."

"Now now, darling, shouldn't there be some mystery within a marriage?" The man transferred his popper into one hand and held the other out to Sam. "Gabriel Chamunda. I'm Castiel's older brother."

"Sam Harvelle," Sam said slowly, accepting the hand with some caution. "Cas is at the house." He leaned out of the doorway and pointed towards the Harvelle home. "My wife is upstairs calling over, so they know you're here."

"Goody! Shall we just wait here, then?"

"Well, Cas is on crutches, so it's kinda hard for him to get from there to here..."

"No trouble," a British voice said from behind Gabriel. "I'll just take the keys and drive right over--"

"Oh no you won't," Gabriel's wife said, protectively clutching her purse. "Not after what you did to our other car. You're lucky I let you in this one."

"I'll go swing the car around and grab him," Gabriel said diplomatically. "Do you guys happen to be open for business?" He gestured his hand in the general direction of the Roadhouse.

"We will be," Sam said; the creaking open of a door and a whiff of her scent told him that Jess was standing at the top of the stairs.

"Can the wife and sibs and kiddielinks wait inside?"

"...Sure. Babe?"

"Yeah?" Jess called down.

"Can you get the key for the Roadhouse? We're gonna wait inside."

"Okay." Jess disappeared back into the upstairs.

"Excellent," Gabriel said, and turned to his wife. "Darling?" She raised an eyebrow at him, but nonetheless reached into her purse, drew out the keys to the van behind her, and set them in Gabriel's hand. "Back before alosersayswhat."

"What?" Sam said, the instant before his brain caught up with his ears. Gabriel positively hooted and scampered away.

"My apologies," Gabriel's wife said. "My husband thinks he's funny no matter how many times I've tried to disabuse him of the notion," she added, loudly enough for him to hear her as he got into the car; he turned and then revved the engine as if in defiance of her.

Jess appeared behind Sam, brandishing a set of keys in her hand. "None of the food is gonna be ready, but we might have some stuff that you can snack on if you're hungry..."

"Thank you for your hospitality," Gabriel's wife said, a little coolly, but no less sincere; behind them Gabriel maneuvered the car in the proper direction and then puttered towards the house. "I haven't introduced any of us. My name is Kali Chamunda; the overgrown manchild you've been speaking with is my husband. My children." She stepped to the side and gestured behind her, where
a boy that looked to be Kevin's age stood, next to a girl who seemed to be as old as Ben and who clutched the hand of a toddler boy. "Inias, Gail, Eliah." Inias gave a cheerful wave; Gail smiled almost cryptically up at Sam and Jess; Eliah seemed content to shove his free hand in his mouth and suck on his fingers. "And these are a few of my husband's and Castiel's siblings," she gestured even further back, towards the three young adults behind the kids; after a moment of quiet she raised her eyebrows, informing them that they were free--and expected--to introduce themselves.

"Rachel Shurley," the one woman among the group said. "It's a pleasure." Sam imagined she and Kali got along famously, judging by the shared plainspoken tone of voice.

"Balthazar; charmed," the British-voiced one said, gesturing out with his arm and bowing, not deeply but nonetheless grandly.

"And, um, I'm Samandriel," the last one said, with a big but nervous smile.

"Well, hi, nice to meet you," Sam said, giving a long wave in lieu of shaking hands individually. "I'm Sam Harvelle; this is my wife, Jessica," he continued, wrapping his arm around Jess's waist and marveling at the thrill it gave him to introduce her as such. From the way she cuddled into his side he figured the feeling was mutual. "My family runs the Roadhouse; we just moved in upstairs. Here, we'll let you in..."

"Thanks for taking care of Castiel," Samandriel piped up from the back of the group, as the Shurley family followed Sam and Jess around to the front door of the restaurant.

"You'll want to thank my brother Dean," Sam said, fiddling with the keys as he tried to find the correct one. "He's been Cas's shadow the past day and a half."

"Oh?" Balthazar cut in, an amused lilt in his tone. "Is our dear big brother collecting admirers as well as children now?"

"Shut up, Balthazar," Sam heard Rachel chide--he didn't see her elbow him in the side, just under his rib cage--but despite himself the remark made the corner of his lip twitch, and he made a mental note to tease Dean mercilessly about having carried Castiel to the house the other night. He wouldn't say that aloud right now, though; Sam wasn't so cruel.

He found the right key, turned the lock, and pushed the door open. His and Jess's parents had cleaned up pretty thoroughly; while most of the fall-themed decorations were still up, the tables and chairs had been put back to rights.

"Have a seat anywhere," Sam said. "I'm sure they're going to be here any minute..."

"Can we get you anything?" Jess asked. "Water, at least?"

A general grateful assent went up from the group and Jess flounced off towards the kitchen. From the corner of his eye Sam saw Balthazar lean back and watch Jess go, his eyes not terribly subtly trained on her rear, and Sam released something very close to his wolf growl. Balthazar threw up his hands in capitulation, and Rachel reached out and smacked the back of her brother's head. The whine of car brakes floated in from outside, followed by muffled conversation. Bodies turned in the direction of the doorway, watching for an awkward amount of time while, outside, Gabriel tried to assist Castiel out of the van. Finally the thumps of doors shutting were heard, followed by the clicking sound of crutches, and then the squeaking of the door being opened.

"Uncle Cas!" Inias was the first to stand up. He hesitated to run to him, feeling too old now, so even though Gail was slow in sliding out of her chair, she beat him to Castiel.
"Whoa there, kiddo," Gabriel said, intercepting his daughter and picking her up before she could barrel into Castiel. "Let Uncle Cas sit down, okay?"

Dean stepped out from behind Castiel and Gabriel--he was instantly suspicious of Gabriel when he saw him and was insistent that he also help Castiel get from the house to the restaurant--and went to the table where Castiel's family had chosen to sit, pulling out a chair.

"You must be Dean," Balthazar mused.

"Yeah," Dean said, a little taken aback. "What makes you say that?"

"Lucky guess." Castiel maneuvered around Dean and sat down, cutting off any further inquiry on Dean's part. "You okay, Cassie?"

"Could be better, but I'm fine," Castiel said, settling in his chair. He looked to Gabriel and gave a little nod, and Gail was set down in Castiel's lap was careful aplomb.

"Sorry we weren't here earlier, bro," Gabriel said. "We--okay, I," he amended, when he saw Kali raise her eyebrows at him, "overslept, so we got a late start, and traffic is absolutely nuts."

"It's okay." Castiel glanced around at his family. "I wasn't expecting all of you..."

"It was either come with Gabriel to get you, or get roped into going to Michael's Thanksgiving luncheon," Rachel explained.

"Ouch." None of them had noticed Jess return, with several glasses of water carefully balanced on a tray. "I don't know who Michael is, but I feel bad for him," she continued, as she distributed the water to their guests.

"He's our oldest brother," Gabriel elaborated. "We love him, but he's a little insufferable."

The door opened again, and an icy blast of almost-winter wind ushered in six more people.

"Your esteemed hosts, I take it?" Balthazar directed at Castiel.

Castiel nodded.

"Well, hello there," Ellen said, glancing at the newcomers. "I'm Ellen Harvelle; I'm the owner of the Roadhouse. This is my husband Bobby," Bobby tipped his cap in greeting, "my daughters Jo and Charlie," she set either hand on both girls' heads, "my brother Ash--"

"Yo."

"And it looks like you've met my boys and my daughter-in-law." She gestured at Dean, Sam, and Jess.

"These are some of my family," Castiel piped up, angling himself so he could point to each person in turn. "My brothers, Gabriel, Balthazar, and Samandriel; my sister Rachel; my sister-in-law Kali; my nephews Inias and Eliah; and," he bounced the knee of his good leg to indicate the little girl on his lap, "my niece Gail." A murmur of greeting ran through those assembled. "And, everyone," he continued when they quieted down, "this is Kevin." He gestured towards Kevin, who stood to the side of, and a little behind, Charlie.

"Hi," Kevin said, breaking the awkward silence after a few seconds.

"Another for Joshua, then?" Balthazar asked, somehow gentle through his flippancy.
"No, his mother is coming to get him today."

"You're sticking around for that, right, Cas?" Dean asked.

"Well...I don't know," Castiel said, looking at Gabriel and Kali. "I'm sure we have plans?"

"We can stay if you want, Cassie," Gabriel said with a shrug. "Traffic the way it is, we've definitely missed Michael's thing, and we'd be absurdly late to Joshua's service even if we left right this second."

"We shouldn't impose on these people, dear," Kali said.

"It's not an imposition," Dean said quickly, before Ellen could speak.

"You're welcome to stay," Ellen said, shooting a glare at Dean, not for his offer, but for usurping her.

"We couldn't," Kali said.

"No, really, it's not any trouble. We're already expectin' a lot of people. We had a wedding yesterday--"

"Cas told us about that, congratulations," Gabriel said.

"Thanks," Sam said, echoed by Jess.

"--and most of those guests are coming to dinner tonight, too," Ellen continued. "So we've got what's left from yesterday, plus what we're going to cook up today, and I seriously do not want a ton of leftovers taking up my fridge 'til December. Really, you'd be doin' us a favor."

"Anything for the kind people who put my little brother up for two nights," Gabriel said, before Kali could object further. "I'll just give Michael and Joshua a call and tell them not to expect us..."

"Do that on your way to the kitchen," Kali said, standing up. "Inias," she said, and her oldest son immediately snapped to attention, "look after your brother and sister. Your father and I are going to assist the Harvelles with dinner."

"You don't have to--" Bobby started.

"I insist," Kali said, in a tone that brooked no arguments. "If we're going to stay, we're going to help."

"Ooh, baby, I love it when you get all bossy," Gabriel said, without a trace of irony.

"Ew," Balthazar said, covering his ears.

"I concur," Castiel muttered under his breath.

"Well..." Ellen said, slightly caught off guard but never one to turn down free assistance. "Kitchen's that way, you can just follow my lead..."

"Um," Samandriel piped up, shyly raising a hand to catch Ellen's attention. "Before that, can...can I use your bathroom?"

"Sure thing. It's over that way." She pointed towards the set of doors marked MALE and FEMALE.
"Thank you," Samandriel said, standing with more verve than expected, and near-running for the restrooms.

"Better get the water hole up and running..." Ash said, heading towards the bar.

"What can I do to help?" Rachel asked, setting off a hustle and bustle of people meeting up with one another, re-introducing themselves, and orienting the newcomers to the Roadhouse. In the midst of it Balthazar sighed, realizing that Rachel or Kali would at some point notice him lazing about and give him hell for it, and started to stand up, but balked when he felt Castiel's hand on his arm.

"Gail, why don't you go see if you can help Mommy or Daddy?" Castiel said, and the little girl slipped off his lap with a bright "Okay!" and jogged off after her parents. Balthazar took his seat again, dragging the chair a little closer to Castiel.

"What's up?"

"Is Samandriel all right?" Castiel asked, glancing in the direction of the restrooms.

"Oh, sure. It was a long car ride. He probably just had a lot to drink before we left the house."

"Are you sure that's what it is?"

"Well...honestly, no," Balthazar admitted, lowering his voice. "He's been acting weird for the past few days."

"Weird in what way?"

"Um... jumpy? A little shifty-eyed. And..." he lowered his voice even further, leaning closer to Castiel, "I caught him breaking into Gabriel's stash of scent suppressors."

Castiel frowned. "Why would he do that?"

"He says that he doesn't want any negative attention."

"Has someone been bothering him?" Castiel asked, a protective snarl creeping into his voice.

"Not unless he's been sneaking out at night. I haven't seen him go anywhere but Gabriel's house for two weeks, ever since his birthday."

"Has he said why that's the case?" Samandriel had expressed interest in helping Castiel with his work, but he didn't think Samandriel would start without consulting him.

"He says he doesn't want to fall into a life of sin like I did when I turned seventeen," Balthazar said, rolling his eyes. "Not sure how seriously to take him on that."

Castiel snorted. "Me neither." He settled back in his chair, folding his arms, and then swept an earnest gaze over his brother. "No one has been bothering you either, right, Balthazar?"

"Oh, Cassie, you know me," Balthazar said, punctuating his bravado by standing up. "It's impossible to harass someone who's always says yes."

"What are you two gossiping about over there?" Gabriel called, before Castiel could say anything.

"Your mother's sweet ass," Balthazar shot back.
He unfortunately did so just as there was a general lull in conversation, and a forest of horrified gazes, crowned by the fierce glares courtesy of Ellen and Kali, turned towards him. He had the decency to look sheepish.

"Think you just earned yourself a spot washing dishes tonight, little bro," Gabriel said, and the daggers in Ellen's eyes melted into disguised poison.

"Why Balthazar, thank you so much for volunteering."

"Oh, fuck you, Gabriel," Balthazar muttered under his breath.

From the corner of his eye Castiel saw Samandriel exit the bathroom. Even from a distance Samandriel's face looked pale, and the steps Samandriel took were trembling. He raised his hand and his voice to catch Samandriel's attention, but they were lost in the general commotion, and Castiel filed it at the forefront of his brain to pull Samandriel aside and investigate at the earliest opportunity.

Garth had watched a car drive past his pond maybe five times before he finally hailed it. At first he was afraid that in the driver's frantic haste she wouldn't see him, but the fear proved null when the car lurched forward and snapped backwards as the brakes were stomped.

"You lost, lady?" Garth asked, when he had come around to the driver's side window.

The window was quickly rolled down. "Do you know where Anthony Road is?"

"It's this thing right here," Garth said, gesturing to the dirt path perpendicular to the paved street she was currently on. "Storm took out the sign awhile ago and they never got around to putting a new one up."

"If I take this road, it'll lead me to the Roadhouse, right?"

"Yeah, but--"

"Thanks."

"Whoa, wait a minute!" Garth said, putting his hand on the window ledge to still her. "The Roadhouse is closed for the holiday."

"No, I'm not going there to--my son is there," the woman said. "I'm Linda Tran. Jody Mills told me that my son is at the Roadhouse."

"Oh, right," Garth said. "You're Kevin's mom. Yeah, he should be there. You mind if I hitch a ride over there with you? I was just on my way up there."

There was a clicking sound as Linda unlocked the door. "Get in."

Garth hurried over to the passenger side door and sat down; Linda stepped on the gas before he managed to shut his door.

"Whoa now! You wanna be careful here; go a little slow. There's a lot of rocks and stuff along this road; you'll blow your tires out if you hit 'em the wrong way."
Linda didn't reply verbally, but he did feel her begin to compress on the brakes.

"Uh...anyway, hi, I'm Garth. I'm part of the pack that the Roadhouse belongs to. We just drove past my houseboat; I live there."

"I hate boats," Linda said, almost Pavlovian in the immediacy of her response. "I'm sorry," she said after a pause. "That was rude."

"It's okay," Garth said. "Here, watch out, that's a sand trap."

Linda swerved, narrowly avoiding both the sand trap and a tree. "Thank you."

"No problem. You see how the road bends coming up? Once you get around that, it'll open up to the clearing with the restaurant is. Yeah, this way's much quicker than if you went all the way around and took the main road. Just gotta be careful."

Linda grunted in response, bearing right when the path demanded it. In the near distance she could see a two-story wooden building, two small wolf-children playing in the dead grass, and two people--two young teenage boys, it looked like--standing on the side porch, watching the little ones.

Garth very nearly smashed his head against the dashboard when Linda again slammed on the brakes. She ripped the keys out of the ignition, dropping them on the floor of the car as she unlocked and kicked her door open.

"Kevin!"

"Mom?" Kevin and Inias had barely had time to register the car coming onto the Roadhouse's lawn before Linda fought her way out of the car and screamed her son's name. Inside, the others heard the yell, and several of them made for the door.

"Kevin," Linda repeated, suddenly quiet, the drive that had pushed her through two days of almost nonstop travel leaving her in one fell swoop of relief. Garth quietly unlocked his door and stepped out of the car.

"Mom! Mom!"

Garth saw and heard a sob escape Linda's mouth the second before Kevin threw himself in her arms. She yanked him into her at the same time and both of them collapsed onto the ground, together making a noise born of relief and elation and heartbreak, ugly and beautiful at the same time.

Garth turned his gaze away, suddenly achingly unable to watch, and caught sight of his family and a group of strangers crowding around the outside of the building. At the forefront Charlie, tucked under Bobby's arm, was crying freely; beside her Ellen was wiping away tears with the heel of her palm, her other arm clinched protectively around Jo's waist. Next to Ellen, Castiel watched with an indescribable look on his face, only slightly aware of Dean gleefully, proudly nudging him with his elbow.

Garth turned his gaze back to mother and son to see that their human forms did not suffice for this moment. Linda lay, huge and sleek and black, curled on the ground; Kevin, already small as an Omega and even smaller because of his age, lay pressed against her trunk, his face burrowed in her fur. Her front leg held him, sheltered him, as she desperately licked his face, high-pitched whines that sounded like crying and sounded like screaming struggling out of her throat.
"Happy Thanksgiving, guys."
1) Demonblood sold as a red powder that smells of sulfur, and its effects are to induce feelings of euphoria and invincibility, but also to make the user extremely vulnerable to the power of suggestion. When administered non-consensually, it is slipped into drinks; this causes it to lose its color, taste, and smell. When administered consensually, it is usually snorted. Basically, if you somehow crossbred cocaine and GHB, you'd get demonblood.

2) I'm fudging the details of obtaining a restraining order for ease's sake, but I did research it, and am using the basics. A CHO is a Civil Harassment Order, a type of restraining order used against someone with whom you're not in a close relationship, i.e. a stalker. And irl you wouldn't get a co-signer, but it seemed to fit into this society's dynamics.

3) Waterfowl are part of wolves' natural diet, so duck replaces turkey as the traditional Thanksgiving meal. Only Alaskan wolves are known to eat salmon, so in this world, salmon is considered somewhat gourmet, and people who like it are thought to have delicate sensibilities.

4) W/R/T being able to smell sexual orientation. Upon coming of age, a person releases sex pheromones that are meant to attract people of a particular gender. So, to use the Harvelle kids as an example, Jo puts out the pheromone that's meant to attract men; Sam and Charlie put out the pheromone that's meant to attract women, and Dean puts out both of those pheromones. I don't have any poly- or pansexual characters (at the moment), but if I did, they would release pheromones that would attract men, women, and the various flavors of genderqueer people. Please note that these pheromones attract genders: man-attracting pheromones, for instance, attract not only cismen but transmen, regardless of the stage of transition.

Charlie and Sam (and Dean) release the same woman-attracting pheromone, which is why you can't say there's a "straight man" scent and a "lesbian woman" scent; rather, there is a "sexually attracted to women" scent. It's a subtle distinction, but it's important. Also, you can only smell what a person's sexual orientation is, not their romantic orientation. I hope you're taking notes, this WILL be on the test.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"All right, Mr. Harvelle. In your own words, tell me what happened."

"Well, it was yesterday, around noon," Sam said, fidgeting in his chair. Ellen and Bobby had pulled him aside and advised him to report the prior day's incident, before enough time passed that he let it slide. So now he sat on the opposite side of the desk from Officer Rick Carnegie, whose Alpha gaze bore into Sam with the full weight of general irritation behind it. "I was just about to leave the house for my wedding."

"Who's house?"
"My adoptive parents'. 202 William Street. Anyway, I heard someone at the door, and when I went to see who was there, it was Ruby Masters."

"Now, who is Ruby to you?"

"Well, she was a friend of mine from three years ago, until she started slipping demonblood into my drinks."

"Was that ever proven?"

"I can show you my records from rehab."

"No, I mean was it ever proven that she was the one supplying you."

"No." And hadn't that been the biggest fucking punch in the dick, to find out that Ruby and her bedroom passed a tox screen with flying colors.

"All right." Rick shifted in his seat, a little bit of what looked like condescension mixing into his annoyance. "And what are you saying she did yesterday that's got us spending our Thanksgiving doing this?"

"Well, she "flirted"," he encased the word in air quotes, "with me--"

"How so?"

"She...she was saying that she still loved me, wanted to see me one last time before I got married, that sort of bull. It was completely insincere."

"Mmhmm." His tone was hard to place. "And what else did she do?"

"Well, she insulted my wife. Rather vulgarly, at that."

"And your wife's name?"

"Jessica Moore. Well, Jessica Harvelle once we file the paperwork."

"Jessica Moore? That's the girl who...wasn't she in that fire?"

"Yes, my wife was attacked in her bedroom last year," Sam said, as flatly as he could. "Ruby referred to Jess as "barbeque" yesterday."

"Insults ain't really enough to file a police report over--"

"And, as the clincher, she tried to give me a red powdery substance that smelled like sulfur," Sam interrupted.

"And you figured it was demonblood."

"That did seem to be the most logical conclusion, yes," Sam said, trying to keep his jaw from clenching.

"Welp, we got the drug screen back from Donna," Rick picked up a manila folder from the desk and then tossed it back down, gesturing with his hand for Sam to open and peruse it at will, "and it's negative. Crushed up aspirin, red dye, and burnt match heads for the smell. April Fool's a couple months early."
"All right," Sam said, with forced evenness. "So no drug charges. I would still, however, like to file a harassment charge."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously, and ideally a restraining order as well."

The burst of air that went forth from Rick's nostrils sounded suspiciously like a snort. "I don't think you've got much of a case for a restraining order, kid. Old flame shows up at your door on your wedding day, talks some trash, and tosses some fake demonblood at you? Judge'll write it off as a prank."

"Are you kidding me?" Sam sat up in his chair. "That's ridiculous. Ruby is dangerous."

"Did she threaten you in any way?"

"She tried to give me what any reasonable person would think was demonblood. A mind-altering substance that she is well aware I used to be addicted to. I am pretty sure she was trying to intimidate me at least."

"All right, all right, calm down," Rick said, and Sam could practically hear the man rolling his eyes with his voice. "Look, you wanna petition for a restraining order, I won't stop ya; I'm just letting you know that there's a good chance it'll get laughed out of the judge's chambers, especially if Miss Masters is an Alpha."

"Why on earth would that matter?"

"Well, Alphas are territorial. It'll get written off as just her wanting you back."

"All due respect, Officer," not that Sam was feeling any in particular, "but that's bullshit, and it's not an excuse besides. If anything that makes it more important that I get this order. My wife is an Omega. If Ruby gets it in her head that I 'belong to' her or whatever, she could literally kill Jess."

"Like I said," Rick just barely avoided snapping, "I ain't gonna stop you. By all means grab your Alpha and go down to the courthouse and file a CHO."

"I don't need my Alpha to do that," Sam said through gritted teeth. Betas and Omegas had won the right to represent themselves a century ago.

"You do if you want to have any chance of this thing going anywhere. You're still living in the Alpha's territory, right? You didn't move out?"

"My wife and I are still in that territory, yes."

"Then if you can convince your Alpha that they got a vested interest in keeping Ruby Masters off the property, you can get 'em to co-sign your petition, and a judge'll think twice about shredding your paperwork offhand."

"That is such crap."

"That's how it is, kid. Count your blessings. You got an Alpha, use it to your advantage."

"I don't want to use my mother to my "advantage"," Sam spat, standing up. "Thank you for the advice, Officer, but I'm going to the courthouse and filing of my own accord."

"Suit yourself." Rick picked the file off his desk and shuffled the papers, tapping the stack against
"Yeah, I think we're done here," Sam said, pulling his coat off the back of his chair. "You are going to file this report, right?"

"That's my job, ain't it?"

"Good. Thank you." Sam turned.

"I gotta tell you though, this is one of the more unusual complaints I've had to file," Rick said, standing and picking up the tox report. "Most Betas would be happy to have an Alpha this devoted to them."

Sam stopped, his hand on the door knob, and turned his head, fixing Rick with the most contemptuous glare he could muster.

"No. We wouldn't be."

"You have to let me help you. It is literally the least I can do to thank you."

"We don't need the help," Ellen said, gently. "Please just go spend time with your little boy. If I were you I'd've superglued him to my hip the moment I saw him."

"No, no," Linda said, with obviously difficulty at the thought of maintaining her decision. "I don't want to smother him. I want to get him back to normal as soon as possible. As much as I can. He's made friends"--Kevin and Inias seemed to be hitting it off, and Charlie was only half-helping with preparation as she kept abandoning whatever duty was assigned to her to go hang out with them--"he's enjoying himself. That's good. I don't want to distract him from that. We should just...try to make this a nice holiday."

Ellen nodded. "I understand." She had done much the same thing with Sam and Dean, though in her case she hadn't known what else to do. They'd been an infant and a Kindergartener, respectively, the last time she'd seen them, and she had no idea what to do with the two teenagers she and Bobby brought home besides treat them like they'd been there all along. "All right, then...help me with the ducks?"

"Sure. Just...tell me what you need."

"They just gotta get to the table. Here, follow me..."

Linda did as bade, trailing Ellen as she re-entered the kitchen and headed for one of the counters, where sat seven platters of roasted duck. Jo stood close to them, sprinkling greenery over them as garnish, and she looked up when she sensed Ellen and Linda approaching her.

"Mom. Has it occurred to you that we so do not have enough duck for everyone?"

"That's what we got leftovers for," Ellen said. "Hope Cas's people like salmon."

"I like salmon," Balthazar said as he passed behind them, his arms full of the dirty dishes that had been created by people at other work stations.

"That doesn't surprise me," Jo said.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Balthazar asked, pausing, the purr in his voice revealing him
"Rich people always do." Indeed the people who had chosen salmon at the wedding were on the upper-middle-class side of the scale, or had aspirations to be.

"Oh do we?" Balthazar said. "Well maybe I will just have duck or...whatever else you're serving."

"Venison."

"Most of that was made into bacon this morning...shit," Ellen said, a grim look on her face. "I don't think that'll be enough for people..."

"I'm on it," Dean said, having also been passing by and stopping to eavesdrop. "Got an idea I wanna try."

"What is it?"

"You'll find out," Dean said, breezing past them.

"All right, I'll have duck or whatever Dean's venison surprise is, and you will have salmon," Balthazar said.

"I never agreed to that," Jo said.

"Mm, that's why I'm putting forth the offer now."

"Are we making a bet or something...?"

"Just betting on whether or not your palate is refined enough for salmon."

Jo's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, my palate is plenty refined. You are so on."

"Excellent. Then it's a deal."

"Would you, please, stop causing trouble?" Rachel appeared at Balthazar's shoulder, and he winced as her fingers pinched around his ear. "Come on, those dishes aren't going to do themselves."

Jo suppressed her laughter as Balthazar was dragged away by his sister, and turned to find Ellen giving her an amused look.

"What?"

"That goes for you too, Joanna Beth."

"What?" Ellen rolled her eyes. "What?"

"Nothing. Go help your father or something, Mrs. Tran and I have the ducks covered."

"Fine," Jo pouted, turning. Ellen reached out and gave a firm thump to Jo's butt; Jo blew a raspberry at her mother and then quickly scampered off before there could be any further reprisals.

"What?" Ellen asked, when she reoriented herself and found Linda giving a strange sort of smile.

"Nothing," Linda said, picking up one of the platters of duck. "I am just...I am relieved that Kevin and I...we'll be able to do that sort of thing now."

"You and me both, sister," Ellen said, taking a platter as well. "Jo..." She trailed off for a moment
as they crossed the kitchen, until she adjusted her pace so she came close into step with Linda.
"Someone tried to make off with Jo once," she continued, her voice low. "About three or four years
ago now. My boys walked in on it; they all three tore the fucker up before he could get away with
her. So...I don't know exactly how you feel, but I've got some inkling."

Linda stopped in her tracks, just barely keeping herself from throwing her platter to the floor.

"Why? How can people do this?"

"I don't know," Ellen said, elbowing the kitchen door open a little harder than she needed to. "And
I'm glad I don't, because if I did, I'd probably be one of them."

"It was stupid to think that here would be different," Linda said, her voice suddenly so far-away
that Ellen felt she couldn't reach out to ask what she meant.

"The world is full of assholes," Ellen said instead, hoping that covered all bases. "But," she pushed
her finished duck away from her, pulling another one closer in its stead, "there are a lot of good
people out there, too."

"I know. Thank God."

"Did you thank Cas yet?" They had made it to the long stretch of tables that anyone who couldn't
cook had busied themselves setting up, and Ellen set her platter down one of them.

"I tried," Linda said, with a laugh. "I think I only managed to blubber incoherently at him."

"Understandable."

"And he told me to give it all to God, anyway," Linda continued, going to the opposite end of the
stretch to put down her platter.

"Yeah, my Dean told me he was the religious type."

"So who is this guy to you, anyway?"

"Nobody. Well, he's been a houseguest since Tuesday, but we didn't know him before that."

"So...do you know if he does this for a living, or...?"

"I don't think so. It seems like it's a purely voluntary endeavor for him."

"Do you know why he does it?"

Ellen shrugged. "Haven't asked."

"So you don't know if he's part of an organization or anything like that."

"We don't know for sure, but it doesn't seem like he is. Although we're wondering if he'd like to
be."

"What, you know an organization for this kind of thing?"

"No, but Bobby--my husband--and I are...thinking about starting one. I mean, we have no concrete
plans," Ellen added quickly, when she saw Linda's expression change. "It's just an idea we started
kickin' around. Doing something for these Beta and Omega kids, whether it's mounting rescue
missions or something else..."
"If you are serious, I would like to be a part of this."

"Absolutely."

"Not that I have any spare money at this point. I wasn't exactly going to work these past few months..."

"We can help you out, if you need."

Before Linda could properly accept or refuse there was a knock at the restaurant door, which was instantly invalidated when the door opened without waiting for an answer, a small chorus of "Happy Thanksgiving!" accompanying it.

"Sorry we're late; I got a call about some strange noises," Jody started. "Turned out to be some stupid kids setting off firecrackers, and five minutes before my shift ended, wasn't that great. Oh, I saw Sam at the police station too, but only for a second. He was talking to Rick last I saw. Is this...?" Jody paused mid-way through removing her coat, having finally caught sight of Linda. Behind her, Sean was affectionately rolling his eyes at Jody's babble, while Owen was fighting his way out of his coat.

"Jody, this is Linda; Linda, Jody," Ellen filled in, unnecessarily.

"Well, hey there," Jody said, after a moment of not knowing what exactly to say; unnoticed, Sean helped her out of her coat. "Good to...finally see a face to go with the voice."

"Same," Linda said, with a weak laugh.

"Oh, um, my husband, Sean; my son, Owen," Jody said, gesturing to either side to indicate her companions. Linda seemed to snap out of her spell and went forward to properly greet the family.

"Nice to meet you," Sean said, once they had shaken hands, before looking around her to address Ellen. "Everyone's in the kitchen helping out, right?"

"Yeah."

"All right, then. That's where I'll be."

"Wait a minute, honey, I'll go with you," Jody protested.

"Nah, you stay with Ellen and Mrs. Tran here," Sean said.

"Mom, can I go play outside?" Owen interrupted; his harried mother hadn't really noticed it, but Owen had seen the 17-and-under crowd fooling around outside, and hanging out with them seemed like a much better way to spend the holiday than getting roped into helping the grown-ups get dinner ready.

"What? Oh, sure, go ahead, sweetheart."

"Thanks Mom!"

The door swung open and banged shut at lightning speed, and Jody tuned to laugh about it with her husband only to see that he had used the opportunity to sneak away towards the kitchen. Turning a bemused expression to Linda and Ellen, she threw up her hands and snorted.

"All right then. I suppose I call the first meeting of the...the Alpha Moms Club together."
Linda turned, sending a meaningful glance at Ellen. "Maybe that's what we'll call ourselves."

"Call what now?" Jody asked.

"Here," Ellen said, shifting on her feet. "Help us put out the rest of the duck, and I'll tell you about what we're thinking..."

"So, that cutie who smells like she could like me, do I have a chance?"

"Huh? What?" Samandriel blinked. "Who?"


"Oh, um...yes."

"Is she looking?"

"I...I don't know."

"Well, you're no help," Charlie pouted, flopping down on the porch.

"Sorry." Samandriel smiled sheepishly.

"It's fine. I can test my own waters." Charlie leaned back on her hands, tilting her head back. "Ar~gh, I need a girlfriend so bad! The only other lesbian I know already has somebody." Lily had gently shot Charlie down during the reception, when Charlie put forth the idea of going on a date. "It's not fair."

"You've been having trouble?" It was now Samandriel's turn to look amused.

"Don't laugh at my pain."

"I'm not," Samandriel said, earnestly. "I'm laughing at...the absurdity of the idea."

"Smooth," Charlie said, raising her eyebrows. "Flattering me won't get you any, you know."

"I'm not trying to--" Samandriel's face flushed.

Charlie elbowed Samandriel's arm, grinning cheekily. "Anyway, the idea is absurd. I have no trouble finding ladies. I have trouble keeping them."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. So, my first girlfriend, right? She was awesome. I met her at a Renn Faire, which is an automatic +10 points."

"Of course."

"Her name was Gilda, and she was an amazing kisser. But just as things are starting to get good, she moved to a different country."

"Ouch."

"I know. Boo, sucks. So after that I started dating Dorothy, and then she moved to a different
country, too."

"That's rough," Samandriel said with a grimace.

"I know, what the hell, right? So I know you guys live in like, Gardner or something, but I figure that's a long-distance thing I could actually deal with."

"The distance isn't too bad if there's no traffic," Samandriel allowed.

"And you know, my brother is totally thinging for your brother, and I think your brother is thinging back, so I figured if I were dating your sister, it'd be adorable, right? We could go on double dates."

"Wait, what?"

"Ugh, you haven't been here for the past day and a half, but Dean has barely left your brother's side. They even slept in the same bed last night. It's gross and adorable all at once. What, Castiel doesn't have an SO already, right?" Charlie's face hardened in suspicion.

"No, no." Samandriel's headshake was fast and vigorous. "Castiel's only had two girlfriends before, and they weren't together very long either time."

"Oh, okay, good." Dean was certainly down for polyamory and Charlie didn't fault him--had she had the chance, a threeway with Gilda and Dorothy would have been amazing--but if Castiel hadn't been up front about other lovers right from the start, she would have felt obligated to kick some ass.

"Happy Thanksgiving, wolf and wolfette. You're blocking the door."

Charlie and Samandriel looked up from their spot on the steps to see Gwen looking down on them, one fist cocked on her hip and her eyebrows raised. Behind her, her father and grandparents were making their way out of the car.

"Sorry," Charlie said, standing up; Samandriel scooted over, pressing against the handrail to make room. "Happy Thanksgiving," she offered, along with an awkward but friendly hug. She leaned around, taking inventory of the rest of the Campbells and waving at them; they waved back.

"Where's Christian and Arlene?"

Gwen rolled her eyes. "They took their car and drove home last night, after the wedding."

"What? Why?"

"Ugh, because he's a little bitch, that's why," Gwen muttered, with affectionate contempt. "My brother said something stupid at the reception last night and Ellen yelled at him for it, so he "wasn't in the mood" to join us tonight."

"Jeez, what'd he say?"

Gwen wasn't known for her lies by omission, but she tried to temper her words with diplomacy. "He just...said some shit about foster kids that pissed Ellen off."

"...Oh." Charlie shifted back on her feet. "Well...good. I'm glad he left. We don't need that kind of negativity."

Gwen reached out and tussled Charlie's hair with a wan smile. The rest of the remaining Campbells crowded together behind Gwen, and holiday salutations were exchanged in mumbles and weak
hugs. Charlie sat down, hard, when they passed her to enter into the Roadhouse; Samandriel scooted back into a freer position, hands clasped awkwardly to knees.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Charlie said, noncommittally. "Just...it's nothing. Forget it."

"Okay." A lifetime of overhearing mean things said about, and to, Joshua, Uriel, and Balthazar, not to mention Michael and Gabriel's kids, taught Samandriel that keeping quiet and changing the subject was an appreciated course of action. "Um...hey, why not her?"

"Huh?" Charlie looked up from where she had been studiously observing the ground in front of them.

"That lady. She could like you."

"Who, Gwen? Ew, she's my cousin."

"But..." Samandriel trailed off, looking confused; there had been no scent marking a biological relationship between Charlie and any of the people she had spoken with.

"Okay, she's my foster brothers' cousin technically, but to me that still makes her my cousin too and it'd be weird and I don't like it," Charlie said, flapping her hands as if the thought were a cat she could startle away from her. Samandriel laughed softly at her antics, before sucking in a sudden, sharp breath. "You okay?" Charlie asked, her mouth pinching slightly in concern.

"I'm fine," Samandriel said tightly. "I'm just...not feeling my best today."

"Aw, I'm sorry. You need something?"

"No, no, it's fine. I just needed to relax for a bit." Samandriel waved a hand in the direction of the Roadhouse. "I feel pretty bad about not helping--" Quintessential Omega, Charlie thought, "--but I...really needed to sit down and get my head together."

"And I've been here talking your ear off about my nonexistent sex life," Charlie moaned. "I'm sorry. You probably didn't want to hear about it even if you were feeling fine." Kevin had found a companion of the same age and gender--in other words, someone easier to talk to than a girl five years his senior--and Charlie had felt a little lonely. Quiet Samandriel sitting all alone had seemed like a perfect person to talk to in Kevin's stead.

"No, it's fine," Samandriel said, with a gentle smile. "I liked listening to you."

To her surprise, Charlie felt a blush creeping into her cheeks. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. You're..." Now it was Samandriel's turn to go slightly pink. "I thought you were interesting."

*Ladies, you like ladies!* "I already told you flattering me won't get you any," Charlie teased. "You trying to turn me or something?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

There was something odd about the way that Samandriel spoke, but before Charlie could question it, the door to the Roadhouse opened, and Jess stood in the doorway.

"Dinner's almost ready, guys!" Jess called, her hands cupped around her mouth. Gail and Eliah
paused their wrestling in the grass to look up at her; Kevin and Inias--and Owen, on the outskirts--ceased their own conversation from a few feet to the left of Charlie and Samandriel. "Your moms want you to come in and wash up; we're going to eat once everybody gets here." Jess's own family was due to arrive soon, and Sam had called to say he was on his way home.

"Awesome, I'm starving," Charlie said, standing up and brushing off any dirt and dust that might have accumulated on the seat of her pants, and then sticking her hand out to Samandriel. After a moment, Samandriel accepted it, and Jess stepped out of the way as the two ventured into the restaurant.

"Oh, son of a..."

Standing at the table, hands full of food-laden dishes, the heaviness of which they were totally oblivious to, were Rachel and Gwen, standing a little closer to each other than they normally would allow a stranger to, their talk inaudible to Charlie but obviously animated and fully engaging.

"Sorry," Samandriel said, resting a hand comfortingly on Charlie's arm.

"Fuck my life. Just fuck it." Charlie threw up her hands and turned, stalking towards the restrooms. Samandriel trailed silently afterwards, and only just narrowly avoided following Charlie into the door marked FEMALE.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long, guys; I had a bit of writer's block. As a result, I think, this turned slightly more filler-y than I meant it to, but as with last chapter it laid a lot of groundwork for things to come, so I hope you enjoyed it anyway :)

Oh yes, I keep forgetting! Come find me on Tumblr: sweethoneysempai.tumblr.com
Cas’s grace is adapted from the Gospel of Luke; Kali’s is from the Bhagavad Gita; Rufus’s is the opening line to most Jewish prayers. I didn’t go to an interfaith seminary for nothing.

Pears are the state fruit of Oregon. I’ve never had what Dean makes--the whole vegan thing kinda puts a kibosh on that--but apparently it’s good.

The Shurleys’ Thanksgiving tradition is actually one of my mom’s family's traditions.

I've been in choruses all my life but I've never actually taken a music class, so I might be using musical terms incorrectly. Let me know~

"Oh, Sam, hello."

"Hey," Sam said tonelessly, dropping the keys to the borrowed Impala into his coat pocket. "Why’re you sitting out here by yourself?"

"They're finishing up in there," Castiel explained. "I'm waiting until everyone's done and seated. It's easier for me to move around that way."

"Oh. Smart." Sam shoved his hands into his pockets, glancing aside, his jaw set.

"I learned that the last time I was on crutches around the holidays."

"Mm." Sam turned slightly, leaning up against a post. Castiel pressed his thumbs together, glancing down.

"I take it your police interview didn't go well." He'd only caught bits and pieces of information on who Ruby was to Sam and what she had done from eavesdropping on various conversations, but it was enough to go on.

"No." Sam shifted his weight from one foot to the other, cocking his knee and pressing the ball of his foot into the hard ground. "No it didn't."

"Are they not going to file your complaint?"

"No, they said they're going to, so they should. If they don't retroactively decide that I'm too much of a whiny bitch Beta to take seriously."

Castiel grimaced. "What happened?"

Sam sighed, loudly and purposefully. "The only way the officer I spoke with could have been more dismissive is if he wrote “waste of time” on a Post-It and stuck it to my forehead. I hadn't even finished telling him what happened and he was trying to play it down. "Oh, well, trespassing isn't that bad. Insulting your wife's near-fatal injuries isn't that bad. Trickng you into thinking she's
trying to push drugs on you; that's just a silly little prank". That's what the asshole called it. A "prank".

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, you wanna know what the punchline is? It's hilarious, I promise. He said that Ruby showed up yesterday because she felt "territorial" over me. Because apparently, I'm some fucking toy she threw away, and now she wants it back."

"Sam--"

"Wait, it gets better. If I want her to back off--not that I should, because apparently, Betas love it when Alphas harass them, I wasn't aware of this--I have to have my Alpha mommy co-sign for the restraining order. You know, because Mom is my real owner."

"What? You absolutely do not need a co-signer."

"Apparently I do, if I want to be taken seriously." Sam pushed himself away from the post and inelegantly made his way onto the porch proper, coming to sit next to Castiel. Few people chose to dine al fresco at the Roadhouse in the autumn, but Ellen always kept a table out for the few eccentrics that preferred the open, chilly air to restaurant ambiance. Castiel had taken up residence on one of the accompanying chairs, and now Sam took the other one.

"What are you going to do?"

"Hell if I know." Sam leaned over, resting his elbows and upper arms on his legs, and bowed his head, letting out a long, unhappy sigh. "Yesterday I stood up in front of God and everybody and swore that I'd protect my wife," he said, after Castiel let him have a moment of quiet. "But Jess and I want to live like we're equals. Not just with each other, but with Alphas. And I don't want to act like I'm okay with the fact that I basically need my mom's permission in order to feel safe, you know? I don't want to play that game."

"That's entirely understandable." Castiel hesitated, weighing his desire to offer help with the fear of coming off as an Alpha who obnoxiously missed Sam's point, and eventually settling in favor of the former. "I have another sister...I have two other sisters, actually, but I'm only thinking of one, of course. My sister Anna is married to a lawyer, Caleb Milton. He's a Beta, and he's very successful and well-regarded. On his own merits, not because of my sister. Obviously I don't know what it is you're going to choose to do, but if you end up deciding you need legal representation, I could put you in touch with him."

"Maybe," Sam said listlessly.

"There might be..." Castiel paused again, but spoke once he figured Sam would find out soon, if he didn't already know. "I don't know if Dean told you, but the Masters family...Ruby and Meg and everyone...is related to me."

"No, he didn't tell me that yet," Sam said, frowning.

Castiel bobbed his head. "Their father is my brother Lucifer. They are, therefore, related to Anna's husband, so there's a possible conflict of interest there. Though honestly the Masters branch of the family is semi-estranged, so if you did want to use Caleb, there might not be a problem."

"Okay," Sam nodded. "Thanks for telling me. I have to discuss everything with Jess first, in any case."
"Of course."

"But I'll tell her you mentioned it." Sam straightened up, tilting his head back to stretch his neck.

"I am...I'm sorry for Ruby. For everything she's done."

"Not your fault," Sam said tightly. "She's, what, your niece? You didn't even raise her. You can't reasonably take responsibility for her actions."

"True. Though I did babysit her."

Sam snorted. "That must have been fun."

"She wasn't the easiest charge, no." Castiel straightened and stretched out his back. "Are you ready to head inside?"

"Yeah, I suppose..." Sam exhaled, glancing at the door. "Don't tell Dean that I called Aunt Ellen my mom, by the way."

"All right." Castiel tilted his head. "Sore subject?"

"Not really, just...Dean remembers our biological mother. I don't; I was a baby when she passed. Aunt Ellen's the only mom I've ever known, and Dean gets...weird whenever that comes up."

"I see." Castiel nodded. "We have similar issues in my family, with some of my older, half-siblings."

"Yeah?"

Castiel nodded. "Gabriel, as I'm sure you scented, is my half-brother, and he gets along well with my mother. His stepmother. My other four half-siblings don't as well." Metatron seemed to have no particular hard feelings towards Becky, but he didn't show her any real affection, either. Naomi, as Eve's lastborn and only daughter, was intensely loyal to the mother who had whisked her away on weekends to be spoiled and petted and praised. Michael, too, hadn't liked the maternal regime change, and since childhood respectfully but coolly referred to his stepmother as "Rebecca". Which was, at least, better than what Lucifer called her. Becky had not been terribly heartbroken when Lucifer left home.

"What about your, uh...adopted brother?" Sam asked, remembering that Balthazar's scent had been alien to the rest of the Shurleys.

"I have three, and there aren't any problems there." Joshua and Uriel didn't remember their biological parents, and Balthazar had run away from his, so none of them had problems with thinking of Chuck and Becky as their father and mother.

"That's good," Sam said, standing up. "Anyway. Thanks for listening to me rant."

"It wasn't a problem."

Sam leaned over the table, steadying Castiel's crutches as Castiel hauled himself up onto his one good foot. Castiel mumbled his gratitude at that, and again when he managed to hobble around the table to find that Sam had opened the door for him.

A breeze blew past, and while Castiel concentrated on not tripping over the threshold, Sam was unfocused enough to catch a familiar, albeit unexpected scent. When he let the door shut he turned
around, readying a welcoming smile for the visitor.

"Hey Max."

"Hey." Max, as always, stood slightly hunched, his hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders raised as if protecting his neck. Max was the first person Sam had met in group after coming back to Lawrence from his grandparents', and he had never seen Max stand in any other way.

"What's up, man?"

"I, uh...I wanted to talk to you about something that happened yesterday."

"If it's about the demonblood, I already know. Benny was handing some off to Officer Mills."

Max shook his head. "It's not just...I know that part. Me and Lindsay talked to her."

"What's the problem, then?"

"I know that she, that Officer Mills took the demonblood away, but afterwards, after she left, I could still smell it. And Lindsay smelled it too. And I know it wasn't in our heads, because we asked Andy and Lily, too. They didn't smell it before Officer Mills left, but they did afterwards."

"So...so you're saying what, that you think someone else had it on them at the reception?"

Max shrugged tightly. "Maybe not on them. It was real faint. Like maybe someone had been around it before they showed up."

"Do you think someone is using?" Max looked to the ground, guiltily, and Sam raised his eyebrows. "You guys thought I was using?"

"We just..." Max scuffed his foot against the ground. "We know it's been a tough year, with Jess and all. And since it was your wedding that it showed up at..."

Sam fought down the urge to be insulted with the knowledge that his friends had every right, and reason, to be concerned. "I can promise you, I haven't touched the stuff in years. I'll even pee in a cup if you want me too, to prove it."

That earned him a small laugh. "I believe you. But--"

"--that means that someone else might have gotten mixed up in it," Sam filled in grimly. "Did you smell it coming from anyone?"

Max shook his head. "There were too many people there last night. And we, uh...we were trying not to focus too hard on it."

Sam nodded. Obsession was an expected pitfall to recovery; it was why Bobby and Ellen had elected to temporarily relocate him to another state, rather than risk him being around any triggers for relapse. "So there's nothing we can do, I guess, except see if we notice it again."

"Yeah," Max said weakly; his eyes were still trained on the ground. "Figured as much. Sorry to bug you, I just thought you should know."

"Thanks for doing that." Sam shifted on his feet, considering the notion that Max could have called to tell him all this instead of coming over. "You wanna...come in? Eat with us?"

"If it's not a big deal," Max mumbled. Max was the only friend-from-group whose home Sam had
never visited. He almost had once, when he was treating Max to a movie for his birthday and he went to pick his friend up, but stopped when he got close to the door and heard yelling and glass breaking from inside. Max came out fifteen minutes later, and when Sam asked what was happening, said by way of explanation that he was the only Omega in his house.

"I'm sure it's fine."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

Sam turned, reaching for the door; just before he touched the doorknob it moved, seemingly of its own accord, and the door creaked open.

"Thought I'd get that for you," Max said wryly behind him. "You gotta start using your powers more, man."

"Thanks for the tip," Sam laughed, waiting for Max to catch up to him before walking through the door.

The scene that greeted them was almost idyllic. Castiel hadn't quite made it in after everyone sat down, but he'd been close; only Ellen and Bobby, as the hosts, and Dean and Jess, as the ones for whom food was an actual passion, were still milling about, setting out platters of food and tableware. Sam saw a cluster of empty chairs near the head of the table, and he steered himself and Max towards them, setting his friend down between Madison and Samandriel, who had resumed spirited conversation with Charlie. As Sam himself sat, across the table from Max, he took inventory of the guests: his immediate family; his extended family, less Christian and Arlene (somewhat disappointing; Christian was kind of a tool, but Arlene had been unflaggingly nice to him when he went to stay with his grandparents three years ago); Jess's mother and sisters (he knew the rest of his new in-laws had made plans to spend Thanksgiving with extended family); Rufus the divorcee, Missouri the perpetually and purposely single, and Pamela the serial monogamist who simply happened to be unattached at this point, the latter two of whom having finagled Thanksgiving off of work in exchange for Christmas day shifts; the Millses; the Shurleys; and a woman who, by a shared ethnic heritage and the look of elation on her face, had to be Kevin's mother.

"Not a bad turnout this year."

"It's 'cause these fine folk all knew that we had food already half-prepared," Ash said from two chairs above Sam. "Less cooking for them to do." From across the table Lenore wrinkled her nose good-naturedly at Ash, who grinned back at her.

"Hi baby," Jess said, slipping into the seat between Ash and Sam, and leaning over to give her husband a kiss on the cheek. "How did it go?" she asked, more quietly.

"Not that great," he whispered back, finding her hand and squeezing it. "I'll tell you about it later."

"I wanna hear about it, too," Dean said in a low voice, from behind Sam as he passed with a bowl in his hands. Sam nodded gravely, but had to suppress a grin when he saw Dean take the empty seat between Charlie and Castiel. Charlie turned her head, caught Sam's eye, and winked.

"All right, everyone settled?" Ellen asked, as she and Bobby stood behind their chairs at the head of the table. They both took a brief double take at the sight of Max, but having long since been clued in about the boy's family situation by Sam, elected to not comment.
"You kids good?" Bobby called down to the second table they had set up, a few feet away from the main stretch: Owen and Kate sat on one side, Kevin and Inias sat on the other, and Gail sat at the tail end, the odd one out as the youngest by several years. Of the underage group only Eliah, too small to eat unassisted, sat at the main table, held securely in his mother's lap.

"We're good!" Kate called back brightly; the boys gestured to the affirmative.

"Good. Then let's tuck in."

"We gotta say grace first!" Gail called, scandalized that she or anyone might have forgotten, as Bobby and Ellen took their seats. A ripple of amused, awkward laughter ran through the table, followed by uncomfortable glances as not many had even thought about it, and among those that did no one had anything prepared.

Castiel cleared his throat, sitting up taller in his seat, and offered his hand to either side; Balthazar, to his right, instinctively took it, and Rachel beside Balthazar took his. Across the table Samandriel reached across Kali to take Gabriel's hand; at the kids' table Gail latched onto Inias. In a wave of movement the rest of the assembled guests hesitantly followed suite, amidst nervous giggles and under-the-breath sarcastic quips.

Castiel opened his mouth but instantly lost the few phrases he had composed when he felt Dean clap his right hand over Castiel's left. From the head of table he heard Bobby helpfully mutter "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," which went a long way in restoring his bearings, enough to let him rack his brain for something appropriate to say.

"As...as in the Gospel of Luke," Castiel said quickly, before he could concentrate too much on Dean's grip, "the people have come from east and west and north and south, and have taken their places at the feast." He glanced around the table, taking in his Beta and Omega siblings, Jess who managed to wear her scars and the radiance of a new bride simultaneously, Sam who had swallowed down his rage but still carried it in his eyes, Linda reaching across the gap between the adults' and kids' tables to take and hold Kevin's hand in a death grip, and Dean. "May those who are first be last, and those who are last be first. Which, I believe, was the Lord's roundabout way of saying "Let us all be equal"."

"And all the people say "Amen"," Balthazar cheerfully supplied as a punctuation mark, triggering the rest of the guests to do as prompted.

"The spiritually-minded," Kali said suddenly, firmly, looking directly at Castiel with an expression that was somehow both warning and reassuring, "who eat in the spirit of service, are freed from all their sins, but the selfish, who prepare food for their own satisfaction, eat sin."

"Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe..." Rufus muttered loudly, with just enough silliness to make the table, which had collectively been holding its breath, break out in laughter.

"A challenger appears," Gabriel said in a deep voice.

"Finish him!" Balthazar added.

"Okay, what's going on here?" Ellen asked.

"Cassie and Kali get into this game of Dueling Religions every once in awhile," Gabriel said.

"It's not dueling," Castiel said defensively. "It's...complementary."
"I haven't yet capitulated to their imperialist religion," Kali explained primly, with just enough sarcasm to make it ambiguous as to whether she was joking or not.

"I hear you," Rufus said, raising his glass in her direction.

"Castiel is the only one of my in-laws who takes an interest in my tradition," she continued.

"Castiel doesn't like to leave anyone out," Samandriel added, with a mix of diplomacy and admiration. "Our mom--mine, Castiel's, Rachel's, and Balthazar's--is Jewish too," Samandriel gave a nod in Rufus's direction, "so he figured, what's one more?"

"There are a lot of holidays at the Shurleys'," Gabriel said. "You can imagine it gets kinda expensive."

"And then we remember we're filthy stinkin' rich, and we don't worry about it," Balthazar said.

"Must be nice," Jo said pointedly from across the table from Balthazar, sandwiched between Gabriel and Gwen.

"All right, enough talk about money," Ellen said. She stood up again, putting herself in an easier position for carving the poultry she had set out in front of her. "Who wants what?"

The next several minutes consisted of Ellen taking orders for various meats and cuts of duck, plates being passed forward towards her and then passed back to their owners, and silverware clinking as people began eating. Salmon came up the table from the opposite direction, and Ellen stifled her laughter when she saw Jo wrinkle her nose at the fish, but resolutely, if gingerly, take the smallest piece.

"Balthazar? Duck?" Ellen said pointedly.

"Ah...I think I will try whatever Dean's venison surprise was," Balthazar said.

"It's that thing over there, with the cloth covering it," Dean said quickly, not quite covering his eagerness. "I had to keep it warm," he added by way of explanation.

"So what exactly is this venison surprise thing, Dean?" Sam asked.

"Well it's not a surprise to you," Dean elaborated as the tray was passed up towards them. "I used to make this all the time."

"You used to make a lot of things all the time. You're gonna have to narrow it down."

"Okay, remember when we rented that house in Oregon for like four months? We were only supposed to stay there for six weeks, but you broke your arm."

"Yeah...oh, right! I know what you're talking about now. Man, you haven't made that in forever."

Gabriel began patting his hands on the table to create a drumroll. Beside him, on Kali's lap, Eliah laughed and smacked the table, upsetting a fork into the air and then onto the floor. Kali's gaze narrowed into a glare; Gabriel doggedly ignored her while most of the folks around them laughed.

"Behold," Dean said with a grin, as the tray was passed to him and he ripped off the cloth. "Venison bacon and pear grilled cheese."

"Wha~t?" Charlie said, taking one of the sandwiches and holding it up to the light, inspecting it. "There's seriously pear in here?"
"It's really good," Sam said, reassuring and enthusiastic all at once.

"Rapunzel here wouldn't eat anything but this and tomato rice soup the whole time he was laid up," Dean said with an affectionate roll of his eyes. "He kept me barefoot in the kitchen for weeks."

"You were barefoot because you didn't want to wear out your old shoes and Dad wouldn't shill out for new ones."

"That's not the point," Dean said, a steel edge to his lightheartedness.

"And this ain't holiday conversation," Bobby said loudly, firmly.

Sam pressed his lips together and reached over, taking one of the sandwiches from the platter.

"I would like to try one too," Castiel said, and Dean reoriented himself so Castiel could more easily take one. After he had done so, Castiel took the platter and passed it to Balthazar.

"How'd you break your arm, Sam?" Gwen asked. "I don't think you ever told us that story."

"They were pretending to be superheroes," Jess said with a giggle.

"You know the story, I take it?"

"I know all Sam's stories," Jess said, the mirth on her face quietly slipping away. Under the table she reached for his knee and squeezed it; he just as clandestinely covered her hand with his and squeezed back.

"So yeah, like Jess said, we were playing superheroes, and our stupid selves thought it would be a great idea if we jumped off the garage roof to see if we could fly," Sam elaborated. "Dean jumps first, lands on his feet. I jump after him, land on my arm."

"And I have no idea what to do; I'm, like, ten at this point, Sam's six," Dean said. "He's screaming his head off, I'm freaking out, neighbors are starting to come out and see what the commotion is...finally I'm able to drag him over to my bike, and he rode my handlebars all the way to the ER. Massive fracture. Dad whooped my ass when he found out what happened."

"Your father wasn't around when his six-year-old and ten-year-old were jumping off the roof?" Kali said, raising her eyebrows. Unbidden her knee began bouncing up and down, as if providing her an especially tangible reminder that Eliah was safe on her lap. Gabriel reached over, giving her arm a soft squeeze.

"I was watching Sammy that day. Dad was out working, I think."

"We didn't let Jess watch her brother and sisters by herself until she was fifteen," Lenore said, with a concerned tilt of the head.

"He was a single dad," Dean said with a tight shrug. "Couldn't always be around, couldn't afford daycare."

"You see, it's a much wiser decision to let a ten-year-old watch and feed a six-year-old than it is to, say, let the kids' grandparents watch them," Samuel said from further down the table.

"It's what a real parent would do," Deanna added.

"Didn't anyone hear me say that this ain't holiday conversation?" Bobby asked loudly. "It's Thanksgiving, which is pilgrim for "shut up and eat","
"Dean, this is really good," Charlie said, through her half-chewed mouthful. "I mean, this is really good," she continued, after swallowing. "Here, try this." She stuck her hand, holding the sandwich, across the table to Samandriel, who took it with a sheepish smile.

"It is good," Balthazar said.

"It's delicious, Dean," Castiel added, and Dean ducked his head a little.

"Well stop hogging it, let us try it!" Garth called from the next-to-last seat, beside Linda, and the platter exchanged hands towards his direction.

"Mo-...Aunt Ellen, you should put this on the menu," Charlie said.

"I'm not gonna take it from Dean," Ellen said, neatly sidestepping Charlie's misspeech.

"You can use it here, don't worry about," Dean said.

"No, no, I think this should make its public debut at your own restaurant."

"You have your own restaurant?" Castiel asked.

"No, and I'm not gonna have one," Dean said, shooting a we've-been-over-this frown at Ellen.

She returned it in equal measure. "You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. Can we drop this please?"

"Wow, that's, what, four times already someone's asked to change the conversation in the last fifteen minutes?" Pamela asked; the bottom half of the adult table had been mainly busy acquiring food, eating it, and watching the top half. "I think that's a new record."

"And yet, there's been no yelling," Jody said, amused.

"This is nothing," Balthazar said with a shrug. "Try having a holiday dinner with the Shurleys sometime."

"Cassie said his first bad word at a holiday dinner," Gabriel said in mocking singsong.

"Gabriel, please don't."

"This I gotta hear," Dean said.

"Enh, it's not much of a story. I think Cas was, what, five? Michael--oldest brother--" Gabriel added for the benefit of anyone who didn't know "--said something annoying and high-handed, as usual, and Castiel over here called him an, and I quote, "assbutt"."

"Assbutt?"

"It was quite daring; he even threw a fork at Michael, in front of God and everybody. Including Mom and Dad. And Lucifer; he was coming around again at that point."

"You hid from Lucifer the rest of the evening," Kali said, her reserve melting a little bit now that the chance to rib on her brother-in-law had presented itself. "I remember; Gabriel and I had just started dating at the time. You begged us to keep him distracted."

"Lucifer can be scary when he's angry," Castiel said, almost grumbled, defensively.
"Wait, why were you afraid of Lucifer and not Michael?" Mark asked, now that Pamela and Jody had unwittingly engaged the lower half of the table in the upper half's conversation.

"Michael thought it was amusing," Kali said. "Lucifer was the offended party."

"The only person Lucifer loves as much as himself is Michael," Gabriel explained, a note of bitterness tinging his voice. "I don't think he even loves his wife as much as he loves Michael."

"Well he's only with Lilith to spite Dad, so..." Balthazar said, tipping his glass of apple juice—the supply of blueberry vodka had been demolished at the wedding—back.

"Did you know that Lucifer's family lives here?" Castiel asked suddenly. "In Lawrence?"

"I sure as hell didn't," Balthazar said. Rachel and Samandriel both shook their heads.

"I...uh....huh." Gabriel pondered for a few moments. "To be honest, I kinda lost track...? I mean, we only see him in person on, like, his and Michael's birthday. He and I barely talk on the phone. Last I was ever really 100% sure of where they were was when they were in New York, and that was, what, eight years ago?"

From the corner of his eye Dean saw Sam tilt his head, but neglect to say that they had been in New York eight years ago as well.

"Don't suppose he'd appreciate if we made a pitstop at his place on the way home tonight?"

"Don't know," Castiel said. "Not that I even know his address."

Dean did, as did Sam and the rest of the Harvelles, including Jess. Ruby Masters' address was not something any of them were going to forget.

"Suppose it wouldn't hurt to give him a call, in any case," Gabriel said with a shrug.

"That's a shame," Deanna said with a shake of her head. "Being estranged from a sibling like that."

"Sucks," Gabriel said with a shrug, not quite flippantly enough.

"I hated being an only child. I was so happy to have had two children who got along with each other."

"Well, mostly," Mark said, with fond sadness.

"You got along well enough for her to trust you with that one particular secret," Pamela said.

"What secret?" Sam asked.

"You know, about..." Pamela trailed off, and then sent a confused look at Mark. "Wait, they don't know?"

"I thought they did," Mark said, his own face twisting in bewilderment. "I thought John would have told them."

"What don't we know?" Dean asked.

"What didn't Dad tell us?" Sam added.

"She must not have told him," Mark said, turning to his parents.
"Dammit Uncle Mark, what didn't. Dad. know?" Dean ground out, punctuating his words with a harsh rap of the knuckles against the tabletop.

"None of us--except your uncle--knew until after her death," Samuel said. "But your mother...she did what Castiel here does."

"...She what?" dropped from Sam's mouth.

"Who was she?" Castiel asked quickly, leaning forward. "What was her name?"

"Mary Winchester," Deanna supplied. "Mary Campbell?" she tried again, when Castiel frowned and shook his head; the second attempt was met with a similar reaction. "She passed away twenty years ago, so..."

"Still, I...I've done my research. To not even know her name..." Castiel's frown deepened.

"Did you know about this?" Dean demanded, turning to Ellen and Bobby.

"We didn't," Ellen said, sounding strained.

"Mark told our whole table at the reception yesterday," Bobby added.

"She wasn't really sharing this information with everyone," Mark said. "I found out by accident. Didn't tell my parents about it until after she died. But honestly, the whole time you kids and your father were missing, that's what I thought you were doing: continuing her work."

"Dad never told us a damned thing about it," Sam said, almost snarling.

"He couldn't have known, otherwise we would have," Dean said. "As far as we all knew, we were just looking for the guy who..." Dean's face transformed suddenly from bemused to infuriated. "Is that why she died?"

"It's possible," Missouri said.

"Missouri?" Sam turned, looking down the table at her. "You knew about this?"

"I didn't know anything for sure, but I had my suspicions," Missouri admitted. "You know I can smell through scent modifiers. Most of 'em, anyway. There were always strangers' scents coming off of your mama. I thought it was just her students, but I couldn't figure out why she'd want to cover up those scents so much. And when she died like she did...I knew she wouldn't have been doing something shady. She'd be fighting shadiness."

"What did I tell you, Sammy?" Dean said, slapping his hand against the table in a weird mix of pride and mourning, and turning so he could catch his brother's eye. "What have I always friggin' told you? Our mom was the greatest person on earth. Our mom was a God damn hero."

"Are you going to help me continue her work?"

All eyes, even those at the kids' table, turned to the bottom corner of the table, where Linda sat, her knife clutched in a shaking, white-knuckled fist.

"Mom..." Kevin started, reaching out towards her.

"Kevin Tran, you are too smart to think that after this we could just quietly go home and return to normal."
From her vantage point Charlie saw the look of *I-was-still-hoping* flit across Kevin's face before being replaced by a blank agreement.

"Ellen, Jody, and I were discussing this before dinner," Linda continued.

"We were kicking around ideas about if and how we can support what Cas--and Mary--did," Ellen clarified quickly. "My husband and I were talking about it the other night," she continued, sliding her hand into Bobby's. "We want to do whatever's in our power to help you, Cas. Whatever would do the most good."

"I...thank you, but what I do is very, very dangerous," Castiel said.

"Hello, cop," Jody said, giving a small wave.

Castiel caught his breath abashedly but pressed on. "Honestly, the best thing that could happen is to end the social bias against Betas and Omegas."

"Oh, well, we'll just get right on that, then," Rufus said with a snort.

"He's not joking," Rachel said heatedly, her eyes narrowing.

"Rache, calm down," Balthazar said, poking her in the arm.

"No, she's got something," Gwen said, mingling genuineness and the desire to impress. "There wouldn't be a..."market" if people didn't think of us "lower types" as, y'know, *lower*."

"And if people didn't think that our problems were beneath their notice," Sam growled; Jess turned a worried face to him.

"Maybe some sort of activism would be best?" Lenore offered, tapping her lower lip with her finger. "Obviously there must be warning signs for when a child has been abducted, right? We can spread that info to the public at the same time we're undertaking other projects."

"What other projects're you thinking of?" Ash asked, settling on his elbows so he could lean forward, towards Lenore.

"Well." Lenore looked down, fiddling with the tablecloth and avoiding Jess's eyes. "The kind of...talk...that's gone on this past year is unacceptable. I'd like to do something about the...blaming-the-victim attitude we've encountered. When it's about Omegas who've been hurt."

"You could do something with the whole...most abused children are Omegas thing, too," Max said quietly, the first he'd spoken since coming inside. He didn't see Balthazar turn his head towards him, nor the strange look that came over his face.

"Your mom was also big on getting more Betas and Omegas into higher learning," Bobby said in Sam and Dean's direction. "I remember me, your aunt, and your dad all helping her put together pamphlets and posters for that sorta thing."

"Then can we talk campus safety too?" Charlie piped up. "I kinda really hate the whole *I-stay-home-during-heat-week-so-knotheads-won't-harass-me* thing."

"Yeah, I wasn't a huge fan of that either," Jo said, lifting her hand.

"That kinda thing happens to Alpha women, too," Madison put in. "I mean, not as bad," she added quickly, reaching a hand across the table to touch her sister's, "but it happens."
"Could get campus cops in on that," Jody mused. "Could also push to get the police more training on how to deal with trafficked kids."

"Seems like you guys've had this stuff on your mind for awhile," Gabriel said; Eliah had begun fussing and so Kali passed the toddler to his father.

"We've got an Omega child," Jody said.

"I do too," Lenore added.

"Us as well," Ellen said. "And three Beta kids to boot."

"And I just spent half a year thinking of nothing else but the fact that I have an Omega son," Linda said.

"Mom..."

"What is it?" Linda turned her gaze to Kevin and he looked away from her; his tablemates averted their eyes, trying not to notice how burning red his face had become.

"Can we just...I don't want...forget it." Kevin waved his hand, a bit too hard to be dismissive.

"Kevin--"

"Later." Kevin busied himself with his silverware, staring down at his plate as if looking at anything else would turn him to stone. "Later, okay?"

"...Okay," Linda said slowly, sinking back in her seat. She jumped a little bit when she felt a hand on her shoulder, but managed to flash the tip of a grateful smile when she turned her head and saw it was Garth who offered the support.

"Maybe we can save this kinda talk for after dinner, huh?" Garth said, looking blithely around the table. "Food's gonna get cold if we don't start eating it."

"Especially the fish," Balthazar said pointedly; Jo stuck her tongue out at him.

"Yeah, Joanna Beth, you don't want to eat that stuff cold," Ellen teased; Jo turned her venomous look to her mother.

"Why are you eating fish to begin with?" Gwen asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Made a bet," Jo said with an overly nonchalant shrug. "He eats Dean's food, I eat...this...stuff."

"Do it, do it, do it," Gabriel chanted under his breath, bouncing Eliah up and down to the beat; Kali elbowed him in the side.

"Do it, do it, do it," Dean took up, as Gabriel took the time to wince; Charlie and Ellen joined in, followed by Ash, Garth, Bobby, and Sam; and soon most of the table, either amidst amused laughter or passionate conviction. Jo's face turned dark, self-conscious pink; Balthazar waggled his eyebrows at her, causing her to bark out a laugh.

"All right, all right!" Jo brandished her knife, as if daring anyone to keep egging her on. Very deliberately Jo picked up her fork in her other hand, set both utensils on her piece of salmon, and cut a small chunk off.

"Hold your nose, it helps," Gwen advised.
Jo made a noise in Gwen's direction, set down her knife, and held the fish close to her lips. She gave it a few experimental licks, made a face, and then in one fluid motion pinched her nose shut and shoved the fish in her mouth.

"Well?" Balthazar prompted, as Jo chewed slowly and swallowed with equal reticence.

"It's...not...awful," Jo admitted, setting her fork down. "I can see how someone born rich could like it," she added snidely, when Balthazar smirked triumphantly at her.

"Oh, I wasn't born rich, darling," Balthazar said, raising his glass at her. "I just adapted quite well to being so. That said, I'll have some duck now."

Jo's intended answer was cut off but a knock on the door, followed by the door slowly creaking open.

"Benny?" Dean stood up to get a better look at the newcomers.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Ben crowed from atop his father's shoulders.

"What he said," Benny followed, with a little wave.

"What're you two doing here?" Dean asked.

"Welp, we finished Thanksgiving at our house, Andrea went to visit her folks," who appreciated Ben's presence in Benny and Andrea's relationship even less than Andrea did, "and Junior asked if we could stick our heads in here. Figured we could at least say hello."

"You know how it works; find a seat," Bobby said, gesturing around the room with a shrug.

"Ooh, Junior can have my chair!" Gail cried out, sliding out of her seat. "I'm done!" she said by way of explanation, picking up and showing off her empty plate.

"Put your plate in the sink, Gail," Kali admonished, and Gail scampered off to do as bade.

"We won't be eating much," Benny said, stooping to allow Ben off of his shoulders. "Filled up at home."

"But I wanna eat Aunt Ellen's food; it's better than Andrea's," Ben protested, and the room erupted into guffaws.

"Can't argue that," Benny said under his breath, searching out an extra chair and bringing it to the bottom of the adults' table.

"Excuse me?" Gail had reappeared at Ellen's elbow.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Ellen replied.

"Can we sing now?"

"Gail, no," Kali said.

"Not everyone does the same things we do, kiddo," Gabriel said, gentler.

"What's she talking about?" Bobby asked.

"It's tradition," Samandriel piped up. "Every Thanksgiving, after we're done eating, the family
gathers around the piano and sings carols. It's basically the start of the Christmas season for us."

"So, what, you guys, like, pre-game Advent?" Dean asked. "You pre-game the pre-game?"

"Excuse you, heathen, but we are dedicated Christians," Gabriel said. "Well, except for this one here," he added, poking his wife's cheek; she batted his hand away.

"Oh, I see," Ellen said, turning her attention back to Gail. "Well, we don't have that tradition, sweetie, but we do have a piano."

"Thank you!" Gail chirped brightly, before making a beeline towards the piano.

"You don't have to let her do this," Kali said.

"Nah, it's fine," Ellen said. "I miss having little ones around to get excited over things. All my kids are boring ol' grown-ups now."

"Thanks Mom," Jo said. Her piece of salmon had several more knife and teeth marks attributed to it now.

"Daddy, will you help me take the dust cover off?" Gail called; her little hands had already started to pull the heavy cloth off the piano.

"Damn, she knows what that thing's called?" Rufus said, his lips twitching amusedly.

"She better," Gabriel said, passing Eliah back to Kali and standing up.

"Gabriel teaches music part-time," Castiel explained.

"Weekend work. Brass is more my thing, but percussion's pretty useful," Gabriel said, before crossing to his daughter.

"When I'm away at school, Gabriel will fill in for me at church," Rachel said. "I play the piano for the choir. Castiel conducts." She nodded in his direction.

"Yeah?" Sam asked, looking at Castiel.

"I can only play chords and I can't sing, but I can keep time well enough," Castiel said.

"That's not true," Dean said. Ben had trotted over to greet him, and Dean slipped an arm around the boy's thin shoulders as he addressed Castiel. "I mean, I'm sure you can keep time and all," he amended. "But you can sing."

"And how did you come across this knowledge, hmm?" Balthazar asked, raising his eyebrows, as Castiel tried to process the fact that of all the memories from the previous night Dean could have gotten back, it was those of Castiel singing him to sleep that made it. "Don't tell me you got Cassie to sing in public. Or was it more of a...private recitation?"

"Will. you. knock. it. off," Rachel growled, swatting Balthazar about the head with each word; Jo and Gwen burst into laughter as Balthazar tried, unsuccessfully, to dodge the blows.

There was a shriek of giggles; Gabriel had thrown the dust cover over Gail's head and she tore it off, indignant and entertained all at once. Gabriel skipped backwards as Gail went to push him; she lost interest in punishing her father once he had escaped her youthful wrath and a more pressing concern presented itself to her.
"What should I play?" she asked of the group at large.

"We're polling the audience for the first song," Gabriel announced, folding the dust cover.

"Gail, play your Uncle Cas's song," Balthazar called, throwing up his hands in preemptive defense.

"Balthazar..." Castiel grumbled.

"Okay!" Gail said, before realizing that Castiel was in the midst of protesting. "Inias, you have to do the drums," she called imperiously over to her older brother.

"You have to say "please", Gail," Gabriel reminded, before glancing over at the tables. "Five'll get you ten this girl grows up to be an Alpha."

"Inias, please do the drums," Gail tried again, and the combined puppy-dog eyes of his sister and father dragged Inias begrudgingly out of his seat. Gail clambered onto the piano bench, spreading her fingers over the keys, and everyone assembled winced when she pressed down on a key.

"Yeah, you're gonna need to tune this," Gabriel said, as Gail tried out more notes. "I think it tuned itself into another key, actually."

"Daddy," Gail whimpered, obviously crushed.

"You're fine, kiddo." Gabriel pressed a key, and then another, until he found the pitch he was looking for. "That's your starting note. Go for it."

Both Inias and Gail hesitated for a second; as if sensing it, Castiel turned in his seat, stretched his arm over the back of his chair, and tapped the air in 4/4 time.

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

It wasn't one of the more marketable Christmas songs, but to one extent or another everyone in the room was familiar with the tune. This arrangement, however, was unlike anything any of them had ever heard. Gail was not merely parroting notes, but actually singing a melody as best her immature voice could; Inias's hands were busy pounding out a driving rhythm, conjuring the image of a chase scene, on the unused piano, and occasionally raised his own voice to add a harmony to Gail's line. Castiel had switched to cut time a few measures in, pushing the song uptempo, and the two had taken to it readily.

O come, Thou Fruit of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny
As if cued, Samandriel and Balthazar had joined, as well.
From depths of Hell Thy people save
And give them victory over the grave
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

Gabriel released a whistle, imitating a flute, and suddenly the drumming slowed down to bare bones, the harmony becoming more pronounced.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

Inias drummed them out, lightening his hands on the piano until he found a good spot to cease altogether. They were met with slightly stunned silence, and then someone started clapping, and then everyone. Gail blushed, hiding her red face in her hands; Inias and Gabriel, conversely, gave elaborate bows.

"These kids are amazing," Dean said under his breath to Castiel, as similar compliments were being paid to Gabriel and Kali more overtly. Ben hadn't left his post at Dean's side, but now he seemed oddly transfixed on the redhead girl who was giggling under the amount of praise being showered upon her.

"Gabriel would probably send them back if they weren't," Castiel said, unable to suppress the proud grin he had worn ever since Gail started singing.

"What makes it "your" song, though?"

Castiel rolled his eyes. "They're the ones," he indicated his siblings, "that decided that. Emmanuel is my middle name, and they ran with it."

"Besides," Balthazar said, unable to help overhearing from where he was eavesdropping, "don't you suppose the lyrical content suits his MO? It's practically Cassie's theme song."

"If we get whatever we're doing up and running by Christmas, we know what the "campaign song" is going to be," Jess said.

"You should record a version of yourself singing with the kids," Lenore said, winking at her eldest.

"I second that idea," Sam said, squeezing Jess's hand.

"Cas, I gotta ask," Bobby said, when Jess made no response to the idea besides a blushing red face. "What started you in on this whole thing?"

"You mean...the rescues?"

"Yeah."

"It was..." As many times as he'd been asked, answering had never gotten easier. "It was just...something that I thought I was supposed to do."

"How come?" Dean asked.

"A few reasons. Mainly, I just...felt strongly that I was called to do it. That I needed to be doing it."
And it was either let the feeling drive me crazy, or act on it, and I chose the latter."

Rachel's hands, which had been resting on the table, curled into fists; she dragged them across the tablecloth and into her lap.

"That's real admirable, Cas," Jo said.

Castiel shook his head, tightly but emphatically. "I'm not admirable."

"Dean," Ben said, tired of grown-up talk, tugging on Dean's shirt. "Can we have dessert?"

"I want dessert too!" Gail said, having overheard; Ben looked at her as though he had found some rare and precious treasure.

"We're not done eating dinner, guys," Ellen said.

"They are," Dean said, planting his hand on Ben's head. "I can cut up some pie for the kids. They're just gonna get antsy if we make 'em wait."

Ellen looked at Kali, who shrugged; she didn't let on that it was Gail's begging eyes, and not her own weariness, that made her acquiesce. "Go ahead, Dean."

Rachel stood at the same time Dean did. "I'm finished," she elaborated; her plate was mostly empty. "I'll put this away."

She followed Dean into the kitchen; he stiff and awkward as he felt her somewhat gloomy presence behind his own curious one. When they entered the kitchen he went for the fridge, and she the sink; she had just set her dish on the counter and turned on the water when Dean's voice floated over her.

"What's the real reason?"

"That is the real reason," she replied coolly, lightly scrubbing at her plate with a sponge.

"Oh come on. It's real obvious that he left some things out of that explanation."

"So?" She put her dish down with a harsh clanging sound. "Did it occur to you that Castiel might have deeply personal reasons for doing what he does? And that you are not entitled to his private thoughts?"

"Whoa." Dean put his hands up. "Sorry."

"My brother is a good man," Rachel pressed, the smallest hint of a shake in her voice. "That is everything you need to know about him."

"I do know," Dean said, softer.

"Good. Don't forget it."

She stormed out of the kitchen, leaving her plate where it was. Dean didn't move until a beat after the swinging doors finally came to a rest, and then he shuffled over to the sink, to finish washing both Rachel's and Gail's plates.

He heard the strains of the piano, played lightly to minimize the effects of it being out-of-tune, and a feminine voice; it took him a second to parse that it was Rachel's voice.
"...it's a long, long week for someone wired to please / I keep taking my aim, pushing it higher / Wanna shine bright, even brighter now / Wish I could tell myself..."

Whatever conversation was happening took a level in volume, and that combined with sudden rush of spite made Dean block his ears to any attempt to hear whatever Rachel was singing. He took his time taking one of the apple pies he'd been coveting since he'd gotten them at the supermarket the other day out of the refrigerator, cutting two equal slices for Gail and Ben, and skimming off the ragged edges for himself to eat...and then cutting himself a slice, because he was a grown-up now and he could eat dessert whenever he wanted, thank you very much.

Finally, after finishing his slice and getting dessert forks out for the kids--whom he suspected would eat mostly with their hands, anyway--he couldn't really think of a reason to stall any further. Steeling himself to act like Rachel hadn't just torn him a new one, he took both plates in hand and elbowed his way back into the dining area.

"Don't try so hard / God gives you grace; you can't earn it / Stop thinking you're not worth it..."

Someone had seen to it that another chair was placed at the kids' table, and Gail and Ben had taken eager seats. Dean found the beginnings of a foul mood Rachel had sown in him slip away as they waved to him, as if he hadn't already seen them.

"...Because you are / He gave you His love and He's not leaving..."

"Say "thank you", Ben," Benny prompted, when Dean sat the plate down in front of the boy.  

"Thank you, Ben!"

Dean laughed.

"...Gave you his Son so you'd believe it / You're lovely even with your scars / Lovely the way you are / So open up your lovely heart..."

Dean slid back into his own seat, trying not to look too obviously at Castiel, relying only on the corner of his eye to show him that Castiel had, by the fork hovering over his plate, tried to resume eating, but found himself unable to do anything but semi-reluctantly listen to his sister.

"...Don't try so hard."

Chapter End Notes

The awesome version of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" I used as the basis for this chapter, as well as "Don't Try So Hard", can be found at http://8tracks.com/honeysempai/the-first-and-the-last.

Sorry this took so long; I was involved in two shows that took my focus away from this story. Sorry also for the weird formatting; I've given up trying to figure out AO3's html tags. XD
Unready

Chapter Notes

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Heat
Heat refers to the period of time when those with female genitalia (ovaries, cervix, vagina, uterus) are ovulating, i.e. able to become pregnant. Heat occurs monthly, during the Third Quarter phase of the moon. Werewolves have an estrous cycle, not a menstrual cycle, so werewolves do not experience periods.

Physical symptoms of heat include increased libido; increased production of cervical mucus, light spotting; enhanced senses of sight, smell, and taste; increased body temperature; pelvic cramps; abdominal bloating; headache, backache; and heart palpitations. Emotional symptoms of heat are based on hormonal and environmental factors. Experiencing heat with a good partner encourages feelings of well-being, affection, and calm, while experiencing heat with no/a bad partner encourages feelings of anger, anxiety, and even depression. Survivors of trauma are especially vulnerable to the latter. Heat effects everyone differently; we've seen Jo not really be effected, Charlie experiencing nightmares and waking up burning hot, and Jess being both more anxious and more horny than usual. As previously stated, werewolves can use coolants; these decrease libido, anxiety, and body temperature. Pads and tampons are used when vaginal discharge is excessive.

Other Notes
When a werewolf is orphaned, abandoned, or can't stay with their parents, they are placed in privately owned shelters and are officially in the custody of the shelter owners. From the shelters, children can be adopted into packs, after the pack owners pay fees. However, the adoptive children can be returned to the shelter, with much less fuss and paperwork than if the pack was giving up a biological child. Adoptive families can also place children in other packs. You can see how easy it is to traffic children in this world. The Romans both traffic orphans and straight up kidnap kids that they think will be easy/lucrative sells.

Charlie's story has mutated quite a bit since I started writing; the version here is her official backstory. To that end I have gone back and made some edits for continuity's sake. You don't need to reread, it's jsyk.

Since "Tran" is as Vietnamese name, and there were almost no Vietnamese-Americans prior to the 1970s, it's my headcanon that Linda fled Vietnam as a young child in the years following the Vietnam War.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Lookit you, workin' man."

"Hmm?" Balthazar raised his eyebrows, glancing over at Jo, from where he stood at the sink, hands covered in rubber gloves and water. "Why should you be looking? Does this...excite you?" He grabbed the sink hose and pressed the level, spraying a stream of water at a particularly stubbornly stuck-on piece of food. "Hmm? Remind you of something?"
"You're disgusting." Jo seemed to take much satisfaction in dumping the armful of plates she had brought from the dining room into the sink. "What're you doing washing our dishes anyway?"

"It was my assigned task for this evening."

"Ah, yes, for that charming comment you made before dinner."

"I admit that it was not a shining moment for me, no." Balthazar took up a dish in one hand, the sponge in another.

"I'm just surprised you know how to do dishes," Jo said, lifting herself onto the counter so she could sit by the sink.

"I'll have you know that I observe my personal manservant diligently to ensure that he is performing his duties adequately," Balthazar said, in his thickest, most British accent musterable. "I of course, being of high intelligence, have learned through osmosis..."

Jo had begun giggling despite herself, and Balthazar trailed off to listen to her laughter, smiling lightly at the sound.

"In all seriousness, Joanna, I'm sure your image of how I spent my childhood is wholly incorrect. All the Shurley children did our own chores."

"Yeah?"

"Mnhmm," Balthazar intoned slowly. "Our father is the reclusive sort. Also the messy sort. Why take the chance that some hired stranger is going to tell the tabloids all about your literal dirty laundry, when you have a bakers' dozen of perfectly capable children to keep the house in order?"

"I suppose. You missed a spot."

"Yes, thank you." Balthazar scrubbed harder at the spot Jo had pointed out. "So while I had many toys growing up, I assure you that I earned them."

"Yeah?" Balthazar confirmed his statement with a nod. "And what do you do nowadays to earn your toys?"

"Ah, well, nowadays I go to school, for theatre." Jo nodded, indicating the respectability of his choice. "And you?"

"I work. My mom and dad both own businesses, so I help them."

"Admirable. You enjoy that?"

"Enh. It's okay."

"Something you'd rather be doing?"

"I dunno." Jo leaned back against the wall, crossing her arms. "I wouldn't mind traveling, I guess."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. My folks don't really take trips that often. Furthest they've ever gone is New York, I think, and that was for family stuff. They're homebodies. Me, on the other hand, I'd like to smell and see things I haven't been smelling and seeing my whole life."
"Ah, wanderlust. The least satisfying of all the lusts."

"Oh, shut up. You've obviously traveled, you hypocrite."

"What a brilliant observation; you could be a private detective." Jo sneered and stuck her tongue out at him. "In any case, that was merely an accident of circumstance. I didn't have any particular desire to leave England."

"I'm sure your folks feel so appreciated."

"Oh, believe me, I appreciate them plenty. I simply had no particular desire to either leave or stay in my motherland. You will find I prefer my familiar creature comforts to the caprice of other wolves' territories."

"So stay in the public spaces."

"Those are not quite welcoming either, Joanna." Jo cocked her head and opened her mouth, but he inquired further of her just before she could of him. "If you want to get away, why not go off to school?"

"No interest, and no tolerance."

"What might there be to tolerate?"

"Knotheads that can't keep their hands to themselves," Jo said, pressing nonchalance.

"Ah. I would have that problem, if I let it be a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if someone wants a piece of this," he cocked his foot, rolling his body from the hip up, "why not let them have at it? It's no loss to me."

"Are you serious?" Jo demanded, looking at him with wide eyes.

"Don't be prudish, Joanna."

"I'm not prudish, I have self-respect."

"Oh, and simply because I enjoy casual, meaningless hook-ups, I have no self-respect?" Balthazar purred, raising his eyebrows mockingly at her.

"And you really enjoy all those "casual, meaningless hook-ups"?" Jo shot back. "Every single time some asshole humps your leg, you enjoy that?"

"Excuse you." Before Jo could react Balthazar aimed the sink hose at her stomach and clinched the lever, instantly soaking her shirt. "Nosy."

"Are you shitting me?" Jo whisper-screeched, pushing herself off the counter, water dripping down her arms.

"What?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

"Sheesh, I didn't realize you'd--" Balthazar was cut off by Jo reaching over, snatching the sink hose
out of his hand, and spraying him in the face. "Really?

"You deserved that you absolute fuckin' asshole," Jo dropped the hose—the nozzle smacked against
the counter with an angry thwack and retracted partially, leaving it hanging awkwardly in the sink--
and yanked on the bottom hem of her shirt, twisting the fabric to wring out the water.

"It's not a big deal," Balthazar grumbled, wiping the water off of his face. "Just wolf out and go
back to the house for a shirt--...what're those?"

"What're what?" Jo snarled.

"On your stomach."

Jo paused. She hadn't been thinking of her scars; hadn't had a bare stomach around people who
didn't already know about what decorated it for a long time now. She untwisted her shirt and
tugged it down so that the hem of it cleared the button to her jeans, the damp fabric clinging to her
skin. "None of your business."

"Those looked serious--"

"I said that it's none. Of your. Business."

Jo turned away, storming over to a different counter where she had stacked dishes that still held
food whole enough to be packed away and refrigerated. Balthazar watched her; she was aware of
this, and very purposely ignored him, resisting the urge to wring out her shirt further when water
began beading around the hem of it and dripped down onto her jeans. After a second she heard the
sink start running again, and she relaxed enough to go find a knife with which to scrape food into
containers.

She had relaxed too much, as she gave a start and nearly dropped the knife when she turned around
to find Balthazar standing immediately in front of her.

"What the fuck, man? Do you want me to stab you accidentally, or on purpose?"

"Shush." Jo was too shocked to tell him to fuck off when his fingers lightly, but firmly, tapped her
lips; lingering for a second but lifting away before she could regain her bearings. "It has come to
my attention that I have overstepped my boundaries tonight."

"You think?" Jo hissed.

"So," Balthazar continued, undaunted, "since I unwittingly forced you to show me yours, it's only
right that I show you mine. They're quite faded by now, but you can still see them..."

"What are you talking about?"

Balthazar took a step back and then turned, reaching his arms back over his head to grip the back of
his shirt and pull it up. Jo tensed her arms, ready to put her hands on his back and shove him away
while his guard was down, but stopped short when her eyes adjusted to the light bouncing of his
fair skin.

"What the hell...?" slipped out, unbidden, as Jo took in the faint, reddish-pink lines running
haphazardly across Balthazar's back.

"Now now. I only said I'd show you mine. If you are keeping mum, then so am I." Balthazar
released the back of his shirt and reached for the bottom hem of it, tugging it back into place.
"Though if you're curious, looking up the Early Presentation experiments would be a good starting point."

"You were part of the Early Presentation experiments?"

"Ah! It's educated."

"Bite me." Jo made good on her original plans to shove Balthazar away from her; he stumbled but recovered gracefully, as the push was much less forceful than she initially intended. "Of course I know about them. Some people tried to recruit me for 'em. Mom and Dad said no."

"I imagine they did; they seem like good parents," Balthazar said, returning to the sink.

"Did they--the researchers--did they do that to you?" Jo asked, after Balthazar had scrubbed one plate clean and was partway through another.

"Oh no, of course not. They were professionals. It didn't matter what I--oh-ho-ho, no. Very slick, Joanna, but you don't get my story without telling me yours first. That was not our bargain."

"What is it with you and bargains I didn't agree to?"

"Fair is fair, Joanna."

"Fairness doesn't--you know what, fuck it." Jo turned away, throwing her hand up by her shoulders. "I don't care. You're a narcissist, and I'm not wasting my time."

"What was that?"

"You heard me," Jo said, turning back around and folding her arms. "You're a narcissist."

"And how am I a narcissist?" Balthazar asked, his tone a cross between amused, insulted, and genuinely curious.

"Well, you butt into people's conversations, for one. You gaslight people into making deals. And you throw out tidbits of an interesting story and then tell me I'm not allowed to know the rest of it. All tactics designed to get the focus on you, and to not allow anyone to forget about you."

"Did I say private investigator? Perhaps you'd consider a career as a psychiatrist."

"So you're admitting that you're a narcissist."

"So long as you're admitting that you find my stories interesting."

A bundle of incoherent noises fell out of Jo's mouth; the only cogent sentence turned out to be "You know what?", when Jo marched past Balthazar in the direction of the towel rack.

"Oh no," Balthazar said, when he saw Jo reach out and grab a dish towel.

"Oh yes," Jo said, holding the towel at opposite horizontal ends, wrapping it around itself with long flicks of her wrist.

"Don't you dare," Balthazar said, moving to the other side of the island where Jo had left the dishes she had meant to be scraping.

"Oh, I think you've earned this," Jo returned, advancing in time to his retreat, the towel stretched out between her hands, which were angled in readiness to snap one pointed edge of the towel
against whichever part of his body she could reach first. Preferably his bottom.
"I warn you, I might retaliate."

Jo tossed her head, flipping her hair back and momentarily distracting him with the movement. "Bring it."

"Do you like dessert? Of course you do, you're a human being."

Samandriel blinked. Charlie brought her hand down from where she had been waving it in Samandriel's face.

"I brought you some pie," Charlie continued, holding out a plate of pie that she held in her other hand. Samandriel had claimed the need for fresh air immediately after dinner, and had taken refuge on the front porch.

Samandriel smiled weakly. "Thanks. I'm not...I'm still full."

"You barely ate at dinner," Charlie said, her hand wilting back.

Samandriel scuffed the floor and looked down. "Guess I wasn't that hungry to start with."

"You're not feeling any better?" Charlie pursed her lips when Samandriel gave a tight shrug and an even tighter headshake. "Dude, what's going on with you?"

"It's nothing, really."


"I don't know, it's...everything feels hot." Charlie, in her amusing way, was oddly compelling, and Samandriel felt a strange mix of trepidation and relief as the words finally spilled out. "And I feel...I don't know, damp, like I'm, like I'm sweating everywhere." A partial truth, at least. "And I just feel so...achey. And tired. Not to mention I have to keep running to the bathroom..."

And you are so ridiculously attractive that I have to think of Jesus to keep myself from asking where your room is, and I'm pretty sure that's blasphemy and lechery all at once remained unspoken.

"Welp, I'm no doctor, but that sounds like it's either heat or the start of something like the flu, and since I don't think it's the former..." Charlie laughed; Samandriel managed a half-smile. "You wanna go lay down? I can take you over to the house and you can nap in the guestroom."

"That would be wonderful," Samandriel blurted out, any notion that a token attempt at refusing would be appropriate completely forgotten. "Thank you so much."

"No prob. Lemme just put this inside and grab my house keys, okay?"

Samandriel nodded, wilting a little under Charlie's concernedly pursed lips, and staying like that as Charlie turned her head, and then her body, to re-enter the Roadhouse.

"I'm taking Samandriel over to the house," Charlie called over the din, to whomever might hear her. When dinner proper ended the formality of seating did as well. Everyone over the age of thirty, and under the age of three, had gathered near the head of the table, while Sam and Jess and Max and Madison were having a conversation closer to the foot of it; Owen, Kate, Inias, and Kevin were
still at their own table finishing their dessert; Rachel and Gwen were chatting rather amiably on the piano bench (don't be jealous, don't be jealous). She knew Jo and Balthazar were in the kitchen, and that Benny had taken his son and Gail out the back to play, so Dean may have gone out as well, and Castiel probably followed him.

"Everything okay?" Gabriel asked, quieting the discussion his group was having.

"He's not feeling so great," Charlie explained. "Just thought I'd take him over to the house and let him lie down in the guest room until you guys are ready to leave."

"Can I go with you?" Kevin asked suddenly, pushing his chair back and standing up.

"Um...sure, I don't mind," Charlie said. "Mrs...Mrs. Kevin's Mom, is it okay if he goes with me?"

It took Linda a moment of strange quiet before finally allowing "That's fine" to escape her mouth. Kevin hesitated, and then brushed past Charlie to go to his mother, enveloping her in an embrace that started gently and, when she returned it, burying her face in his shoulder, suddenly turned fierce.

"Tell Samandriel we won't be staying too much later," Kali said after a long moment, and Kevin and Linda broke apart even though Kali had spoken to get everyone else's attention off them.

"Will do," Charlie said, while Kevin wandered back over to his table to exchange see-you-laters with Kate, Owen, and Inias. Charlie set the plate of pie down on the kids' table as well, but didn't pay enough attention to see who ultimately claimed ownership of the abandoned dessert as she followed Kevin to the front door.

"Got a tagalong," she informed Samandriel, once they had made it outside.

"Is he staying at the house, too?" Samandriel asked, looking inexplicably stricken.

"No, he's just coming with us for the walk."

"Oh. Okay." Samandriel offered a smile that seemed to acknowledge that its owner had been rude.

Kevin and Samandriel both were quiet on the way over to the house; Samandriel only making enough noise to call the situation over to Castiel, who sat on the back porch stairs of the restaurant alongside Dean. Charlie considered filling up the time with small talk, but couldn't think of anything that would carry a short conversation. Instead, unconsciously, she walked faster, getting to the front door several seconds ahead of her companions. To make up for it she fumbled with her key, and they had caught up with her by the time she got the door unlocked.

"Okay, so. Guest room, bathroom, kitchen," she instructed Samandriel, pointing to each room in turn. "You got a phone? Lemme give you my number, so you can call me if you need me."

Samandriel obediently drew forth a phone, and Charlie rattled off ten digits to be recorded therein. "Text me so I have your number, okay? So I know it's you."

"Okay." Samandriel glanced towards the guest room, and then back at Charlie, wearing an indescribable expression. "Thank you. Again."

"No worries."

Charlie flashed a smile; Samandriel returned it and disappeared into the guest room, leaving her and Kevin to stand for a few seconds in silence after the door clicked shut.
"So. You remember I exist."

"Whatever."

"Uh-huh. Sure. I see how it is." Charlie crossed her arms and turned her face up and away with an indignant "Hmph!" She waited for a sarcastic response, and when none came, she peeked out of the corner of her eye. Kevin didn't appear to have noticed that she had spoken; instead, his head had turned down, his eyes studiously trained on the floor. "Hey." She relaxed her pose, lightly smacking him in the arm. "You okay?"

"Can we...not head back over immediately?" Kevin asked, sounding somewhat strangled.

"I...guess," Charlie said, the corner of her lip turning down concernedly. "This is gonna sound dirty, but you wanna go up to my room?"

"Sure," Kevin said listlessly, already beginning to drift over to the stairs. Charlie nipped into the kitchen first, to fetch two glasses of water and to file Samandriel's number when the requested text came. By the time she made it upstairs Kevin had made himself comfortable on her bed, sitting slumped against her wall.

"What's going on, kiddo?" she asked, handing him one of the glasses.

"Nnn."

"Such articulation," Charlie teased, backtracking to sit on her desk chair. "Mind if I check my email?" she asked, shaking her mouse to wake up the computer, and opening her browser. She had checked both her email addresses (one for school stuff, one for fun stuff) and was about to sign in to Facebook when Kevin's voice floated over to her.

"Do you want revenge?"

"Do I..." Charlie turned around. "Revenge?"

"Yeah."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean for what...what the Romans did to you."

Charlie blinked; her bearings fell around her feet and it took her a moment to gather them all back up. "...Well, damn, son. Asking the big questions."

"You don't have to answer if you don't want," Kevin mumbled.

"No, it's okay, it's...I don't know." Charlie shifted in her seat; the chair creaked under her. "I don't know. It's weird."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I..." Charlie turned, lightly drumming her fingers against her keyboard, not typing anything but letting the rippling clicking sound it made help order her thoughts. "I'm...well, it's weird. My story's a little different than yours, Kev. I mean, I broke myself out, like I told you."

Kevin nodded.

"I busted my arm pretty bad doing it, too, so for the first few weeks I was just trying to keep a low
profile and not fuck my arm up completely, you know? Couldn't really think about trying to avenge myself."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

"And when my bros brought me here, everything was a big mess, because we had all this legal stuff to do. See, the Romans know I'm here. The feds take prints and DNA and from there it was pretty easy to figure out I was supposed to be at a Roman shelter. And...and you know how it is with foster kids, right?" Kevin gave her a look indicating that he had some idea. "Yeah, no one believes a God damn thing we say. And I had...um...built up a reputation as a compulsive liar, anyway." She blushed, her fingers closing into fists against her knees. "So...so I was the delinquent. I was the one running away from "quality homes"..."

"Jeez, Char--"

"So of course at that point I wanted nothing more than to set all of them on fire," Charlie interrupted, her voice dripping with forced evenness, "but mass arson would've kinda fucked up my adoption a little. Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby were paying a pretty penny for the pleasure of my company, so I tried to behave, and sweep any desire to gone on a Roaring Rampage of Revenge under the rug. Hey, alliteration." She wrinkled her nose.

"What about now?"

"Now it's...well here's the thing." Charlie crossed her arms, twisting the fabric of her sleeves between her fingers. "Once I got adopted, for real 100% adopted, it dawned on me that it was over. All of it. And I wanted to...to live like that was true, you know? I mean, don't get me wrong, I still get the strong desire to stab some assholes every once in awhile," Kevin smirked weakly at the inside joke, "but it's...it's not an all-consuming passion. I don't want it to be."

"Why not?"

Charlie drew her legs up to her chest, resting her feet on the chair and her chin on her knees. "'Cause I think that if I let it, it'd take me over. I wouldn't think of anything else. And I really like my life now, you know? If I went after the Romans at this point, well, for one I'd get my ass handed to me, but aside from that I think I'd end up...at the very least emotionally abandoning my family. And I don't want that."

Kevin nodded. "I can understand that."

"But at the same time," Charlie said, spinning in her chair as if the revolution would change her into a costume representative of her alter-ego, "how come they get away with what they did to me? And what about the other kids they still have in their custody? What about them? Where's our justice?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I...I know."

"...Anyway." Charlie put her foot down, staying herself. "You wanted to tell me about if you wanted revenge or not."

"I never said that," Kevin said, nonplussed.

"People generally ask you the questions that they want you to ask them," Charlie recited. "I learned that in my Psych class. And you've been acting weird, kiddo. It's not hard to figure out."

"Could you, maybe, stop stalking me?"
Charlie pursed her lips to the side, giving him an unimpressed look.

"All right, fine," Kevin tried to shrug, it came out more like a fidget. "I don't know either, okay? I don't know if I want revenge or whatever."

"Do you know what you do want?" Kevin made a noncommittal noise. "To go home? Get back to normal?"

"Well I mean my "normal" wasn't that great to begin with," Kevin said in a rush. "It blows to be an Omega no matter what. Especially when your mom's a refugee and apparently friggin' half your neighbors are Nam vets or know someone who died over there."

"Ooh." Charlie grimaced.

"So, yeah, I don't really want to go back home, but..."

"You got an issue with my folks and your mom and everybody doing this activism thing? Maybe?"

"No, it's not that I have an issue with it, it's just..."

"...too soon?" Charlie hazarded gently, when Kevin seemed lost for words for too long.

"I don't want to be a cause," Kevin said quietly, as if confessing. "I mean, I know that it's important. I know this is something that needs to happen. I know that if it helps just one person, it's all worth it. I know. But I'm not...I'm not ready to be a posterboy. Not just yet."

Charlie nodded slowly, and spun in her chair at an equal pace. "You gonna talk to your mom about it? Ask her to lay off for a little bit?"

"I don't know," Kevin said, frustration and affection both evident in his voice. "I know my mom. She's the ass-kicking type. She doesn't like people telling her what she can or can't do. Especially when it's about me."

"Okay, but what are you going to do in the meantime? Suffer quietly? Haven't you had enough of that?"

For that, Kevin had no answer, which was just as well, as Charlie suddenly sat up straighter in her chair, her face compressing into a frown.

"Do you smell that?"

"Smell what?"

Charlie flared her nostrils; Kevin did likewise, and seemed equally as stumped as before, while Charlie's expression turned even more concerned.

"It smells like someone in heat..."

"Maybe your mom or your sister came over."

"Maybe..." Charlie chewed her lip and stood slowly, crossing to her door, inhaling deeply, and shaking her head. "It's not them. That's an Omega scent. That's..."

"Charlie?" Kevin asked, when she suddenly went quiet.

Lessons about scent modifiers were taught in health classes as part of public safety education. Law
enforcement relied on being able to scent suspects or witnesses, so all forms of scent modifiers were illegal. There were many different kinds of scent modifiers, Charlie remembered learning. There were those that covered or changed a person’s entire scent, making them completely untraceable to a sense of smell. There were those that covered or changed a person’s individual scent, or their biological relationship scent, or their attraction pheromones.

And there were those that only covered up the scent of heat.

"Charlie?" Kevin said again, when Charlie suddenly slipped out the door; he hopped off the bed and followed after her.

The guest room was empty, the door open wide. Charlie rounded the bottom of the stairs, following the strongest trace of the scent towards the first floor bathroom. She slowed as she crossed through the living room, her ears picking up the sound of loud, graceless shuffling in the bathroom, nearly but not quite drowning out the sound of crying that accompanied it.

Kevin caught up with her in the middle of the room, and she put her hand out to stay him as she herself crept forward, closer to the bathroom. The closed door couldn't hold back the sound of an aerosol can being—loudly, desperately—sprayed, and Charlie found her hand slightly shaking as she closed it into a fist and raised it to knock.

"Sam--Samandriel?"

"Don't come in!"

Charlie flinched at the yell, as well as the thump of a hand against the door, holding it shut as if it were a secondary line of defense should the door magically unlock itself. "It's just me," she continued, in what she hoped was a gentle voice. "Well, me and Kevin," she said, glancing around the corner at her bewildered companion.

"I thought you went back to the restaurant," Samandriel replied, with a voice that sounded like despair.

"No, we...we went upstairs," Charlie said, a feeling of irrational shame suddenly creeping over her for having done so.

"You said you weren't staying," Samandriel continued, almost in a whimper.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, I didn't think that..." Charlie reached up and grabbed a handful of her hair, pulling it. "Are...are you okay? You need any help?"

"Oh, God..."

"Listen, it's okay," Charlie said quickly; Kevin drifted over to her, his expression still confused but beginning to put the pieces together. "It's okay if you're...if you're trans, Samandriel. We don't care." She glanced at Kevin, who, once the reality of Charlie's words dawned on him, quickly nodded his agreement. "It's cool. I know lots of trans people. At school." There were indeed a handful of transgendered students in the Rainbow Alliance at KCC.

"This shouldn't be happening," Samandriel mumbled through the door.

"Hey, it's okay, you know? I know this...this has gotta be overwhelming, but lots of people are--"

"No, this shouldn't be happening!" Samandriel yelled, a choked sob that made Charlie and Kevin visibly flinch; something within the bathroom fell to the floor. "This isn't what's supposed to
happen; I'm not supposed to...I shouldn't be going through heat, I'm supposed to feel like I should but it's not supposed to actually happen!"

"Okay, okay. It's okay. Just calm down." Charlie put her hand on the door, hoping that in lieu of actually touching Samandriel she could transfer a soothing feeling that way. "Listen, do you...do you want me to go get one of your brothers or Rachel or somebody? Would that help?"

"No."

"You sure? I can't see Cas, you know, not being okay with whatever's going on with you--"

"Please don't."

"All...all right." Charlie shifted on her feet, sending a pleading look to Kevin, who shot an equally hapless one back to her. "Um...do you need anything? We might have some, um, some coolants in there, if you need. And some pads, if..."

"I found them," Samandriel replied, listlessly.

"Okay, good." Charlie smiled weakly at the door. "If anyone asks, I'll say it was me."

"Thank you."

"And listen, um, I...I'm sorry about earlier. Pretty sure I called you a guy a few times tonight. But hey, at least I'm not having an identity crisis anymore! I was trying to figure out why I thought you were cute."

Samandriel released a sound that mixed laughter and sobbing. "I thought you liked my sister."

"I'm fickle." This time the noise Samandriel made leaned slightly more towards actual mirth. "Look, can you...why don't you come out of the bathroom? It's just me and Kevin here. We can all go chill in my room. And we can look some things up, if you want. Figure out why this is happening to you. I'm a Comp Sci major; my Google-fu is legendary, I promise."

"No, no, I can't ask you to do that--"

"It's not a problem, honest."

"We weren't going back to the Roadhouse any time soon anyway," Kevin added, and Charlie flashed him a grateful look.

"You guys really don't have to."

"But we want to," Charlie protested. "If you want to, of course," she added, glancing at Kevin, who gave a forced, but approving, smile.

Kevin and Charlie heard nothing for a long while. Charlie held her breath when Samandriel began audibly moving around in the bathroom; flushing the toilet; running the sink. Her stomach fluttered a bit when they heard the sound of the door unlocking and the handle being turned, and she smiled brightly when the door creaked open and Samandriel's face appeared in sight, peeking out into the negative space as if still unbelieving that there was a welcoming reception on the other side.

"You good to go upstairs with us?" Charlie asked, chipper, but gentle.

The smile Samandriel gave did not have a quarter of Charlie's smile's brightness, but to the back of Charlie's mind it was no less brilliant.
"Yeah...yeah."

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter gave me hell. In addition to losing some of the original material, there's a lot going on in the post-Thanksgiving part of the storyline, and trying to put it in a good order, to maintain dramatic tension, stumped me. As a result, this chapter is a lot shorter than originally planned for taking a month to write, and I didn't get around to any Destiel stuff, but don't worry, they're headlining next chapter.

What exactly is going on with Samandriel will be explained fully as the story progresses, and I don't want to spoil it for you, but I do want to let y'all know that there will be both transgender and intersex characters in this story, and I'll be doing my best to make their experiences (both socially and physically) match with the real-life experiences of transgender and intersex people. If I screw it up, or if you have suggestions/questions, feel absolutely free to contact me.

And to be clear: Samandriel does identify as a woman, and from now on the narration will refer to her with feminine pronouns. Other characters will misgender her, either unwittingly or on purpose, but the narration will refer to Samandriel as "she" and "her".
Questions

Chapter Notes

Remember how I said that lilies-of-the-valley are like jalapenos to wolves? In this world, the juices of the plant are used as a type of pepper spray known as Convallof, after the plant's scientific name, Convallaria majalis. On a related note, I can't take credit for the term "fursploding"; the honor belongs to Cleolinda Jones of the Twilight fandom.

I originally intended Joshua to be a Catholic priest, which is why I named his church St. Jude's. When I switched him to Lutheran, I changed the name, since Lutheran churches are less likely to be named after saints, and if they are, they're less likely to use the name of a comparatively obscure one like St. Jude. Hence Joshua now preaches at Redemption Lutheran Church. Related: I edited Chapter Twelve to reflect this, but to clarify, everyone in the Shurley family knows that Joshua runs a shelter out of the church, but only a few of them know about Castiel's involvement.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"That's the fifth time in ten minutes that you've yawned, Dean."

"Good to know you're keepin' track of my bodily functions, Cas; that's not at all creepy," Dean said. "Bring it here, guys!" he yelled, unnecessarily, as two bundles of fur were already barreling in his direction. Benny had had the foresight to bring along some of Ben's toys, including a ball, and after dessert Dean had started up a game of fetch for Gail and Ben. And Benny too, all things considered; although at nearly six feet Benny towered over the little ones and he had to walk slowly to match their running pace, he seemed to be enjoying himself just as much as the four-year-olds.

"I am not keeping track of your bodily functions," Castiel said. He was interrupted by Ben laying the ball at Dean's feet and wagging his tail; Dean picked it up and threw it, laughing a bit as Ben, and Gail from a few feet away, tore after it. "I am merely noticing that you appear to be tired."

"I'm friggin' exhausted, man." Dean raised his arms above his head, trying to stretch some wakefulness into his muscles. "'S'been a long couple of days. Can't wait to just crawl into bed and sleep forever."

"I hope you sleep more restfully tonight."

"What, was I not restful last night?"

"Not particularly, no. You...I feared further injury to my already compromised appendage, I'll put it that way."

Dean laughed. "Sorry, man. I haven't been that drunk in awhile; between that and the different mattress I guess it fucked with me." He paused when Gail, who had gotten to the ball first this time, brought it to them. Dean gestured that it was Castiel's turn to throw it, and he did so, smiling as Gail dashed off after it. "I'm gettin' old. I used to be able to sleep on friggin' anything."
"It's all right. There is something uniquely relaxing about one's own bed." Dean made an affirming noise. "It's what I look forward to the most, when I come back from a rescue," Castiel continued quietly, mindful of the young ears close by. "Being alone in my own room, in my own bed."

Dean settled back on his hands, tilting his head back and looking up at the night sky. "I dunno, man. That sounds kinda lonely to me."

"On the contrary. It's incredibly peaceful." Castiel glanced at Dean, assessing him. "Have you never had your own room?"

"What, you never shared?"

"No, none of us have. Well, none of us have had to."

"Yeah?"

"Michael and Lucifer shared a room until they were ten, but that was their decision. Family lore has it that for a few years Gabriel would sleep in their room, as well, on the floor." Whenever Chuck felt like embarrassing his thirdborn, which was usually whenever Kali was around, he would tell stories about how adorable little Gabriel had been, toddling towards Michael and Lucifer's room with a pillow clutched to his chest and dragging his favorite blankie behind him. "We would sleep in each other's rooms if we were scared--if there was a storm or we had a nightmare or somesuch--but none of the rest of us have ever properly shared a room."

Dean snickered.

"What is it?"

"I'm just imagining a tiny version of you running to one of your brothers' room because you had a bad dream."

"You imagine incorrectly. I would go to one of my sister's rooms."

"Pfffft."

"I don't see what's so amusing about it," Castiel said, equal parts confused and disgruntled. "Children get scared. It was wiser to go to one of my sisters than to one of my brothers." Naomi would loom, stern and commanding, and order the bad dreams to go away and the lightning not to strike; a precursor of the command post she would later take with the National Guard. Anna would simply tell him that nightmares weren't real and the storm was safely outside the house, but he could stay with her if he wanted to.

"Oh my God, Cas."

"It's not as if I were never in my sisters' place. Rachel and Samandriel would sleep in my room sometimes, if they needed." Balthazar would swear up and down that he was far too old upon being adopted to need Castiel in this regard, but during that first year Castiel had woken up early a few times to find Balthazar snoozing outside his door, wrapped in a blanket.

"Aww, that's sweet. Widdle baby Cassie all gwown up."

"If I recall correctly, the original point of this conversation was that you have apparently never had your own room," Castiel said, narrowing his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, guilty as charged," Dean said, with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I think I had
my own room before my mom died, but I don't really remember it so I guess it doesn't count."

"Why is that? Why haven't you had your own room, I mean."

"Well not everyone can afford a room for each person, Moneybags," Dean said, nudging Castiel in the ribs with his elbow. "We moved around so much that most of the time we were living in hotels, anyway, so all three of us were in the same room sometimes. If Dad picked up more than a contract job we'd get an apartment, and we rented a house a few times, but two-bedroom places are cheaper than three-bedroom places, so when it was pick between a mattress and a lumpy-ass couch, I picked the mattress."

"So I take it you and Sam have shared a bed before, too."

"Could you possibly phrase that in a way that isn't gross?" Dean asked. From the corner of his eye he could see Ben and Gail had abandoned their wolf forms in favor of a game of keep-away over the ball; Benny was playing referee.

"My apologies. You and Sam have slept in the same bed before."

"Yep. Not for years now, though. It would've gotten awkward when Jess started to sleep over."

"That's..."

"...Weird? Messed up? Unhealthy?" Dean supplied, when Castiel floundered for words. "Yeah, I know that, Cas. Believe me, I've been informed."

Castiel put his hands up, pacifying the suddenly belligerent edge to Dean's voice. "I'm not judging you. I'm just curious as to why you've been sharing a room all this time, when you have that extra guest room."

"Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby tried that. Shelter people tried putting us in separate rooms, too, but it didn't work. Sam'd sneak into my room to sleep and...well, try to sneak back before anyone was the wiser. Didn't always make it. And I sure as hell wasn't gonna lock him out, so they finally caved and let us have the two beds in one room, and since then we just never saw the point in splitting up again."

"What made Sam so...determined?" Even when lost as to what to do about the Ruby situation, the image Castiel had of Sam was one of self-assurance. It was difficult to think of him not only hiding out in Dean's bedroom, but breaking rules in order to do so.

Dean stretched out his leg, pushing the toe of his shoe into the dirt and breaking the soil underneath it.

"We got separated for a bit, between Dad disappearing and us living at the shelter," Dean said, in a low voice tinged with something that sounded like shame. "I didn't know where my twelve-year-old little brother was for about three weeks."

"I'm sorry," Castiel said, wilting at Dean's tone and the expression he unwittingly matched with it. "I shouldn't have asked. It's obviously a painful memory for you."

"Yeah, it sure ain't the best," Dean muttered. "And after Sammy found out where I was and hitchhiked his way to me, neither of us were exactly keen on letting the other out of our sight again."

"That's understandable," Castiel said gently.
"Cas, I know it sounds creepy as fuck," Dean said; Castiel graciously looked sheepish. "But believe me, that's the least of it all. I used to be up Sammy's ass so far he could floss with my hair."

Castiel raised his eyebrows at the creative imagery. "Oh?"

"Yep. He wasn't allowed to leave the house without me. Neither was I; I made that mistake once and some creepy old lady broke in to kidnap him or rob the place or whatever, never quite figured out what she wanted."

"My God, Dean..."

"Yeah, so. We could forget about going anywhere by ourselves. Kid had no friends until we moved here 'cause I was always hovering over him. Hell, I wouldn't even let him go to school sometimes."

"You mean, if he was sick?"

"Hell yeah he couldn't go if he was sick. He couldn't go if I was sick. And if Dad was feeling particularly paranoid that day, forget it. You wanna know why Sammy's so smart, it's 'cause he homeschooled himself half the time."

"Why were you so...protective?" Castiel asked, trying to force diplomacy through his incredulity.

Dean kicked at dent he had formed, deepening it. "Had to be."

"But your father--"

"Dad was always out either working or following a lead on the arsonist," Dean interrupted, "so he left me in charge. He told me..." Dean's breath hitched a little, which he tried to cover up with a sardonic laugh, "he told me I was the reason Sammy survived the fire, 'cause I listened to him and carried Sammy out when he told me to. And that's a true story by the way; I did carry Sammy out, I remember it. So I had to live up to that and keep Sam safe whenever Dad was away. And, you know, you take that shit seriously when you're a kid."

Castiel's expression narrowed into a glare. "That was a terrible thing for him to do to you, Dean. You and Sam both."

Dean ceased kicking the hole he had created and instead dug his heel into it, as if bracing himself. "It wasn't so bad. Actually it's what made me start with the food thing. I always cooked for us, whenever we had our own kitchen. Dad was a shit cook, and I was always paranoid that Sammy would give us all food poisoning or set the house on fire. And when we came here and I didn't have to cook anymore, I found out that I just liked doing it for itself."

"Mm," Castiel intoned, offering his approval begrudgingly.

"And you know, me and Sammy did manage to have some good times together," Dean said, the defensive edge creeping back into his voice. "It wasn't all truancy and broken bones."

"No, no, I'm not saying that I'm not glad you two are close," Castiel said, assuaging. "Just that...I wish you had that same closeness under different circumstances."

Dean shrugged tightly. "Well, we got different circumstances. We came here, he got his own friends, I got my own friends, and we're still pretty close, so. Guess it worked out."

Castiel noticed that Dean's gaze had drifted over to where Gail and Ben had given up the ball completely and now were being paraded around the yard by Benny, clinging tightly to his fur lest
they plummet nearly six feet to the ground.

"How did you meet Benny?"

"KCC. I didn't really wanna go to school; Aunt Ellen and Uncle Bobby kinda forced me so I wouldn't be around to control Sam's life anymore."

"I'm sure they thought it'd be good for you too, Dean."

"Yeah, I'm sure they did," Dean said, as if he thought it silly of them to spare a thought for him in that regard. "Anyway, I was just bullshitting with my schedule and picking classes I didn't have to put any effort into, and I wound up taking a cooking class and a freaking wilderness survival class, of all things, and Benny was in both of them. You find a person who shares two of your hobbies, you know you're meant to be."

Wilderness survival Castiel definitely had experience in, and he could try his hand at cooking. Dean didn't notice that Castiel's mind had started wandering, contemplating what other hobbies he and Dean might share ("He has the hands of a pianist, but perhaps guitar is more his style."). because he continued speaking. "Didn't hurt that he rocked the bar scene, either. Dude cannot hold his liquor though, that's the hilarious thing. Me and Lisa..."

The sudden absence of Dean's voice brought Castiel back to the present, and to embarrassment that he had left it in the first place. "I'm sorry? I didn't catch that," he said, rather than admit that he had ceased paying attention.

"Nothing, just...me and Lisa used to drink him under the table. We'd be doing our eighth round of shots, and he's slumped against the wall, regretting his life choices," Dean finished with a chuckle.

"You think he regrets you?" Any opinion Castiel might have of Benny abruptly took a nosedive.

"Oh hell no, that's not what I meant," Dean laughed. "I am the best damn thing to ever happen to him. Trusted confidant, awesome lay--sorry," he said, misinterpreting Castiel's disgruntled look, "built-in babysitter...nope, Benny gets on his knees and thanks God every day for me. It's Lisa who regrets me."

The last few words came out of Dean's mouth as if he had vomited them up. Castiel hesitated, but as was common (at least according to his siblings), curiosity won out over politeness.

"How did you meet Lisa?"

"She was Benny's friend first," Dean said. Ellen had said once that if you spoke of your memories about someone, instead of squirreling them away, it made it easier to let go of them. Might as well try it out now; if it worked there was some other stuff he might eventually be ready to hash out later. "She and him were already messing around, and I guess they wanted a third. So Benny tells me to meet them at this bar, Purgatory. Which I'm pretty sure he forgot is an Alpha watering hole, because I had to kick some ass that night."

"Dean."

"What? I was fine. You think Dad left me to watch Sammy and didn't teach me how to fight? Just because I'm 2'10" in wolf form doesn't mean I can't chokehold some pervy asshole. Or Convalloff him if he fursplodes on me."

"I don't doubt that you can protect yourself." "I have mauled bigger perverts than you" Dean had growled this morning, and even then Castiel had believed it. "I'm just sorry that you had to go
"Enh." Dean shrugged, tightly. "Not the first time, not the last. And it worked out for me; I impressed both Benny and Lisa that night. Believe it or not, she used to like the fact that I don't roll over for anyone who growls at me. Guess that don't impress her much anymore."

"Having a child..." Castiel started, as ever leaning towards fairness and neutrality. "It's not anything you've done, Dean. I've seen this with my brothers and sisters who have kids, and with myself, in relation to my rescues. Having a child simply makes you more...cautious. More likely to see danger where there isn't any. Or to overblow it."

Dean pressed the toe of his shoe into the ground as if trying to drill a hole into the core of the earth. "I would never let--I know how to take care of a fucking kid. I practically raised Sammy for twelve years and look at him. He turned out pretty fucking awesome, didn't he?"

"He seems like a good person."

"He's the fucking best. And Ben's got...you know what, fuck it." Dean crossed his arms, leaning suddenly and heavily against the railing of the porch steps. He knew Ellen's advice was sound, but the spirit and the flesh both were weak. "Whatever. I'm not bitching about this to you. It's pathetic enough as it is."

"What's pathetic?"

"This whole clusterfuck." Dean gestured, to himself, and then to the lawn before them, where Benny sat with his son and Gail, tearing up dead grass and throwing it in the air. "It's stupid. Ben's not mine. Lisa's not mine either, and never will be; she's made that pretty damn clear. And I'm kind of a tool to keep hoping that's gonna change."

"Dean, why do you say such awful things about yourself?"

"It's not awful. It's true."

"So if Ben were your son, and Benny in your place, you would say those things about him?" Castiel pressed.

"I...I don't know, man," Dean said, the unexpectedness of the question catching him off guard and weakening his resolve. "I might."

Castiel opened his mouth to speak further, but was cut off by Dean suddenly whipping his torso around and catching the mass of red hair hurtling in their direction before it could trip over Castiel's bum foot.

"Whoa there, princess," Dean said, lifting Gail up and setting her down several inches away from them. "Where's the fire?"

"We're playing tag; you guys are homebase," Gail said, an explanation and a declaration all at once.

"Speaking of homebase..." a voice said from behind them, and all three looked up to find Gabriel sticking his head out the back door. "We're gonna start packing it in soon, kiddo."

"No~," Gail keened, and Dean bit his lip, possibly to stop himself from protesting along with her.

"Ye~s," Gabriel said with an exaggerated, mocking pout that did nothing to lighten his daughter's
mood. "Sorry, babygirl. Mommy says it's time to head out. Your little bro's falling asleep, and Uncle Samandriel ain't feeling so hot. You've got a few minutes, because Uncle Balthazar basically destroyed the kitchen and he has to clean it up, but we're going to be leaving as soon as he's done."

"How did Balthazar destroy the kitchen?" Castiel asked, in a voice that sounded more resigned than surprised.

"Welp, him and your sister," he poked the top of Dean's head, "got into it with the sink hose. Reportedly there were towels and eventually dish soap involved as well. And what is hopefully red food dye and not blood."

"Jo's gonna pay for that," Dean muttered with a laugh. "I've probably got tomorrow off..."

"So we figure let Balthazar fix up the kitchen, say ourgoodbyes, swing over to the house to get Samandriel, and then blow this popsicle stand. Unless you wanna stay the weekend with your new boyfriend, of course." Gabriel nodded in Dean's direction.

"Gabriel..." Castiel said through gritted teeth.

"What? You're the one practically in his la--"

"Your four-year-old is right here." Indeed Gail was listening to her father, her face alight with great interest.

"Gail, go play, we'll come get you when we're actually heading out." From seemingly nowhere Gabriel produced a handful of dollar-store lollipops and tossed them to her; she caught most of them and immediately ran off to share with her new friend and his father. "Looks like she's got a new boyfriend too..."

"How was your discussion?" Castiel asked quickly, firmly.

"Welp, we tossed some ideas back and forth. Your folks," and he again poked Dean on the head, "wanna talk to you and your siblings about opening a shelter of your own."

"They think we could pull it off?" Dean said.

"Well, it'll take some serious money, especially if you wind up paying people off like Cas does."

"What?" Dean looked at Castiel, who looked away.

"Making sure the Romans don't know what I'm doing is paramount," Castiel said, in a growl of anger and shame. "I've had to...bribe foster homes to sign over custody to Redemption."

"...Shit, I wish we'd've been able to do that with Charlie; it would have been so much easier." Charlie hadn't known the names of her last set of "parents" and had run away too fast to figure out their location.

Castiel looked grateful for the complete lack of distaste in Dean's tone. "You might not decide to do that."

"It does take a lot of money," Gabriel added. "But they wanted to talk to you about loans or something, too; I guess that has something to do with this."

"Oh...no, that's something else." Dean released a sigh that tried to sound aggravated but couldn't mask a sense of defeat. "I wish they would give that up already..."
"Drop what, brother?" Benny stood before them, surprisingly serene even with a giggling, squirming four-year-old pressed against his sides, horizontally tucked under each arm.

"Something about loans," Gabriel said, before Dean could tell Benny not to worry about it.

"Ah," Benny drawled, suddenly looking sympathetically glum. "Brother, you know we can still do it in my name..."

"I don't want that," Dean interrupted, firmly.

"I know, I know. "Yours or no one else's". Just...letting you know the offer still stands, if you change your mind."

"Okay, now I have to know," Gabriel said.

"Then you will be sorely disappointed," Dean said, stretching conspicuously.

"Fine, be like that." Gabriel reached out for his daughter; Benny angled himself so he could pass Gail to her father over the porch railing. "It's not as if Cassie himself, let alone the rest of us, has enough money to give loans without, as it would appear, flouting the Equal Lending Act..."

"Gabriel," Castiel snapped, upon seeing a mix of anger and suppressed hope flash briefly across Dean's face.

"Let's go see how the family's doing, kiddo," Gabriel said flippantly, bouncing Gail in his arms. "Be ready to go soon, Cassie," he tossed off as he slipped back into the restaurant.

"We're gonna head out now, too," Benny said, readjusting his son so he held Ben in both arms.

"Da~d," Ben whined.

"Hush your mouth, Junior," Benny scolded good-naturedly. "We gotta get up early tomorrow to get ready for our trip."

"Dean's still coming, right?" Ben asked.

"Soon as I can, buddy, promise," Dean said. "But only if you come gimme a hug and then go home and go straight to bed, okay?"

"Okay..." Ben didn't stop himself from pouting until Benny half-crouched/half-leaned over to facilitate Dean's bargain, when he angled himself towards Dean and wrapped his arms around the man's neck, with the limp tightness characteristic of someone his age. Benny accidentally caught Castiel's eye when Dean snaked an arm around Ben's back and hugged him back; Castiel gave him a look of understanding that he grimaced at.

"All right, we're gonna go say good-bye to your folks and head out," Benny said, straightening up and offering his hand to Dean; Dean slapped his own palm against it in a gesture that lingered slightly longer than a high-five. "Night, brother."

"Night, Benny."

"Good to meet ya," Benny acknowledged Castiel, who responded in more formal kind. Ben rested his head against his father's shoulder and lazily curled and uncurled his finger to wave goodbye, as Benny stepped in between and over Dean and Castiel to go back into the restaurant.

"Why does he call you "brother"?" Castiel asked, after Dean stayed quiet.
Dean offered a weak laugh. "It's from when we were dating Lisa. Benny joked that we were her "brother boyfriends". Y'know, like the "sister wives" thing?"

"I'm not familiar."

"It's some documentary show they do about this guy who's married to a bunch of women who call themselves "sister wives"." Castiel cocked his head, his expression still befuddled and a tad judgmental. "Yeah. Anyway, Benny thought it was hilarious, and he's called me that ever since, even after all of us broke up. Dork."

"You know," Castiel said, after Dean fell quiet again, although the faint, affectionate smile on his lips spoke volumes, "there is a saying that if you have ever truly loved another person, you will love that person's children, even if the children are not yours." He paused, gathering his thoughts and compressing them into a coherent order; Dean stayed unnaturally still throughout. "I think you are so attached to Ben because you loved his parents; truly loved Lisa and Benny both. And I fail to see how that's in any way pathetic."

Dean inhaled deeply and stayed quiet for a long moment. When he released his breath, he snorted along with it. "Keep blowin' smoke up my ass like that, Cas, and I'm gonna think you're tryin' to get laid."

"Dean."

"I'm kidding, Cas."

"I'm not." Standing, drawing himself up to his full height, was impossible, so Castiel straightened his back; either way he cut an impressive figure. "I'm not..."blowing smoke up your ass". I mean every word I say."

Dean felt himself shrink down a little, unable to countenance either Castiel's awkward use of profanity or his sincerity; he didn't know.

"Castiel?" Both men turned their heads to see Rachel standing in the doorway. "Are you ready? Kali's packing the kids up now and she thinks you should get in next."

"Oh." From the corner of his eye Dean thought he saw Castiel's face fall. "Yes. All right."

Rachel flicked her gaze from Castiel to Dean, taking in Castiel's crestfallen look and Dean's reassuring one, assessing that Dean had not asked anything of Castiel that she would not have approved of. "I'll tell Kali to drive around the back to pick you up," she said, stepping back inside.

"Thanks."

"Here," Dean said, rising to his feet and holding his hand out; Castiel took it with one hand, the other gripping the crutches that he had leaned against the porch railing, and used both to hoist himself up.

"Thank you."

"No problem." All of a sudden Dean had the unreasonable urge to scuffle and not meet Castiel's gaze. "So. You take care of that ankle, okay?"

"I will."

"Don't forget, you still owe me a favor."
"Then I also owe you my phone number."

Dean almost laughed as he took his phone from his pocket. Castiel could have been incredibly smooth if he could master any tone of voice beyond complete and utter earnestness. Castiel fiddled with the machine for a few seconds, punching in his number, and handed it back.

"Two weeks, expect a call," Dean said, pocketing the phone.

"Duly noted." Castiel lifted his crutches and resettled them, rocking slightly side-to-side until they fitted comfortably under his arms. "Thank you, Dean. For everything you did for me the past few days."

"Don't mention it. Thank you for putting up with my drunk ass last night."

"I enjoyed your company, Dean."

"Yeah, well. I...enjoyed your company, too," Dean said, trying to mask but only betraying his awkwardness by switching to a tone of voice he thought sounded doofy enough. He hesitated for a second, assessing Castiel and sending that he was being studied in turn, and then hid the breath he took, stepped forward, and looped his arms around Castiel's shoulders, careful not to knock his crutches out of place.

A beat later Dean felt Castiel's head lift slightly, and then something smooth and cool press against the corner of his mouth, just below his bottom lip. Before Dean could ask, or rather register the feeling enough to confirm to himself what it had been, other people spilled onto the porch from inside the restaurant, and the wavelet of people urged him away from Castiel.

"Don't be a stranger, y'hear?" Bobby said, holding his hand out for Castiel to shake. "We ain't gonna let you, in any case."

Castiel tugged on Bobby's hand, pulling him into a one-armed hug that enabled him to whisper "I'll let you know when I have news about Adam," in Bobby's ear. Bobby nodded his gratitude as he stepped back and Ellen took his place, admonishing him similarly to her husband.

Sam was next, Jess as ever at his side. "Thanks for hearing me out earlier, man," Sam said, when they clasped hands. "I'll let you know what we decide," he continued, when he let go to allow Jess to shake his hand. Jess gave him a grateful smile, leaving Castiel with the impression that they had managed to discuss his offer while he had been outside with Dean.

"Dean has my number; call any time."

"He does, does he?" Sam said, and even from his vantage point Dean could see the wicked sparkle in Sam's eyes.

"Yes," Castiel said, oblivious to it. "Congratulations, again, both of you. Good luck. With everything."

"Thanks."

Kali appeared at Castiel's side, flanked by Linda, who appeared to not want to miss any opportunity to express her gratitude to Castiel, including assisting him into the van. Dean caught one last glance that Castiel sent to him, before becoming preoccupied with safely negotiating the step up into the vehicle; then the connection was lost as the air became filled with "We're going to head out, too" and "It was nice meeting you" and "I'll call you when I hear something". Dean found himself hugging several female relatives and quasi-relatives and watching people take their leave;
he was only able to notice that the rest of the Shurleys had clambered into their van when the engine revved and the vehicle pulled away from the restaurant, turning around to putter towards the Harvelles' house and gather up Samandriel.

He apparently watched the van for an inordinately long amount of time, as when he turned around he found Sam and Jess looking at him, their faces alight with knowing and amused expressions.

"What?"

"How does the phrase go?" Sam asked. "'You sly dog', or something like that?"

"Oh, bite me." Dean turned on his heel and marched back into the restaurant.

"Gwen got Rachel's number, too," Sam pressed with a gleeful lift in his voice, following his brother into the Roadhouse linked arm-in-arm with Jess. "You guys looking to marry up or something?"

"I ain't saying she a gold digga," Jo offered in masked voice; she had been the first to drift back into the kitchen once the bulk of the good-byes were over, but she had overheard enough to have fun at Dean's expense. "But she ain't messin' with no--"

"It is so important to your future that you do not finish that line," Dean growled.

"Ooh, touchy," Jo teased, and jumped nimbly just in time to narrowly avoid Dean slapping her on the ass. "Whatsa matter, you sad that Cassie got away without a kiss?"

"Shut up."

Jo cocked her head. "What? Am I wrong? Did you get a kiss?"

Dean leaned over the sink, taking the hose in hand.

"Oh no, Dean Harvelle, we are not starting that again," Ellen said from the doorway, crossing quickly to Dean and taking the hose out of his hand.

"Yeah, and can we also not start with the restaurant thing again?" Dean asked, stepping away so Ellen could let the sink hose fall back into place. "Especially around strangers?"

"All we said was that we had experience with flagrant violation of the Equal Lending Act in relation to you," Ellen said, putting her hands up placatingly. "And that it's another thing to focus on."

"In addition to running our own shelter?"

"Your aunt and I are gonna talk that over," Bobby said, shuffling into a comfortable spot in the kitchen. "It's a pipe dream, but maybe we can come up with something else while we're thinking of it. Shoot for the moon and land in the stars, that kinda bullcrap."

"Speaking of shelter," Ellen said, glancing over to the door between the kitchen and the outside, where Linda hung back awkwardly. "You mind crashing in the guest room again tonight? It's too late for Linda and Kevin to drive all the way to Michigan, and Jody told us that the Feds are probably going to pay us a visit tomorrow anyway. We figured that since your room still has the two beds..."

"Yeah, no problem," Dean said immediately.

"Thank you," Linda said, inclining her head gratefully, and then casting her eyes about the room.
"Is there anything left to be done?"

"Um..." Ellen also glanced around the kitchen. "Well, food's put away, floor's cleaned, dishes are done. Only other thing I can think of is--"

Dean let out a yelp as suddenly he was hit in the side by a blast of cold water. Sam's laughter was cut off when Ellen rounded on him and he narrowly avoided getting soaked by ducking behind the island. Jo shot forward to try to wrestle the hose out of her mother's hand, realizing she was about to get drenched once again and wanting it to be on her terms this time. Ellen jerked her arm back to avoid Jo, accidentally spraying Bobby in the face across the room, and then with a shrieking giggle she fled as Bobby ran-shuffled after her.

Needless to say, all Jo and Balthazar's work in cleaning up the kitchen was quickly rendered for naught.

"Okay, so, rumors of my googlefu may have been slightly exaggerated."

"It's fine," Samandriel said with a light chuckle, lightly scratching at her cheeks. Her skin was already sensitive, and the aftermath of salty tears and raging hormones was an itchy face.

Charlie spun in her chair, pursing her lips. She had typed every permutation of "why would X go through heat" she could think of into multiple search engines, with X being "a boy", "a male", "AMAB", "MAAB", "a dude", and "a transgirl" respectively. She was met with several articles of men complaining that their female partners "moon time" (as the old-fashioned and the sarcastic still referred to it) was so intense that they considered themselves to be going through the same hormonal chaos just by being around them ("pricks"), and a few blog posts by transwomen analyzing what a lack of heat meant for their sense of womanhood, as well as some exploring the vice-versa, but nothing on why an individual without a cervix would suddenly start leaking cervical fluid.

"I'll keep looking," Charlie promised, weakly but eagerly.

"It's really fine." "No, it's not," Charlie said, stabbing her finger in the air at Samandriel, her scolding somewhere between playful and deadly serious. "I don't like it when people cry in strangers' bathrooms, okay? That is an unacceptable situation."

Samandriel pressed her lips together, fighting the urge to blush. "You're too kind."

"I know, they all are; creepy, isn't it?" Kevin said. He lay horizontally across Charlie's bed next to Samandriel, his head propped against the wall, one of Charlie's Star Wars tie-in novels opened on his stomach. Charlie reached over to her bookshelf, pulled out another paperback, and threw it in Kevin's general direction. The frontispiece smacked gently, ineffectively, against his thigh. "Ooh, you sure showed me."

Samandriel lightly pressured her elbow into Kevin's shoulder, prompting him to be nice. Kevin shrugged off the gesture but retained the message, and fell quiet.

"Maybe we should talk to somebody," Charlie said, after scrolling through yet another page of deadends. "Like, a medical professional somebody."

"I~ don't want to do that just yet," Samandriel said, fiddling with the fabric of her pants legs. "Not
without letting my parents know what's going on with me first. Dad is gonna want to find some
doctor he actually trusts to not go blabbermouthing and that will take awhile." She quirked an
affectionate smile. "I don't want the paparazzi going digging around my family any more than they
already do, anyway. If they turn up something about Castiel..."

Charlie nodded. "How'd you feel if I asked around down here and just didn't use your name? I
know a nurse."

"You mean Ms. Moseley?"

"Hey, wow, you win the prize."

Samandriel paused to give a weak smile before pressing on. "She might already be suspicious. If
she can smell through suppressors..."

"So do you not want me to ask her? I mean, if you think she already knows..."

"Well, would she...?"

"What? Oh, no. Missouri's a great secret-keeper. Hell, she kept quiet about Sam and Dean's mom
for like twenty years, and no one even asked her to."

"She a nice lady," Kevin added, thinking back to the day previous. "I don't think you have to worry
about her."

Samandriel gave an unconvincing grimace.

"Hey, I don't have to talk to her," Charlie said kindly. "It was just a suggestion."

Samandriel's expression relaxed into a tight smile. "I'll let you know?"

"Sure. And in the meantime I'll hit the library, like they did in the Dark Ages." Samandriel's giggle
was cut off by the sound of a car horn. "Shit, your folks!"

Charlie popped out of her chair; Kevin and Samandriel stood nearly as quickly, not having as solid
a seat to push up against. Samandriel reached for, but Charlie beat her to, the can of scent
suppressor, and she squinted her eyes shut as Charlie sprayed her down.

"Here." Samandriel opened her eyes to find that Kevin was holding out a packet of coolants in her
direction. "If anyone catches you with 'em, say they were out of ibuprofen and had to give you
these for fever."

"Okay," Samandriel said, taking and pocketing the packet. "Thank you."

"No problem."

"Here, I'll walk you out," Charlie said, offering her arm to place around Samandriel's shoulders.

"I left my coat downstairs..."

In a flurry of movement Charlie, Kevin, and Samandriel made it to the first floor and into their
coats, Charlie loaning Samandriel an old, unused scarf from the understairs closet for good
measure. The rush had brought a sickly-looking flush back into Samandriel's cheeks, and the
fatigue of an ill person did not need to be faked. Charlie checked Samandriel over, reaching up to
muss her hair for added affect, before opening the front door.
Kali had parked her van as close to the porch steps as possible, and Balthazar had popped open the door to their row of seats to allow Samandriel entrance. Samandriel gave a little wave to tell her family that she would be a moment ("Hurry up, it's freezing!"), and then turned to Charlie, who smiled brightly and then let loose a surprised "Oof!" when Samandriel pulled her into a fierce, tight hug.

"Thank you. For everything."

Charlie wrapped her arms around Samandriel, returning the vigor of the embrace. "Text me when you get a chance, okay?"

"I will."

They let go of each other at the same time, though Samandriel kept her eyes on Charlie as she shuffled into the van, and even after she slid the door shut, through the window. Gabriel reached over, much to his wife's chagrin, and beeped the horn as a good-bye, prompting Charlie, and Kevin in the doorway, to wave as Kali batted her husband's hand away, took hold of the steering wheel, and drove away.

"You do smell that she's a lesbian, Samandriel," Balthazar said, once Kali had gotten them onto a paved road.

Samandriel slumped in her seat and leaned against the window, trying to turn the setting in her head from "girl" to "boy". She'd done it for years; heat and a pretty redhead were curveballs, but nothing she couldn't handle. "I know. We're starting to become friends. We're allowed."

"Friends, sure."

"Leave Samandriel alone, Balthazar," Castiel piped up from behind them. Kali and Gabriel had, knowing that with three kids and a massive family a very large car would be needed, had the foresight to buy a van with not only three rows of regular seats, but with a trunk from whose floor could be pulled a backwards-facing seat. It was in this seat that Castiel resided, his crutches lying across his lap. Rachel, Balthazar, and Samandriel took up the row immediately in front of him; Inias, Gail, and Eliah in the row in front of their aunts and uncle, and Kali and Gabriel occupying the first set of seats.

"Are you prepared to take his place, brother?" Balthazar purred. "Samandriel doesn't seem to be the only one with the hots for a Harvelle..."

"Like you have any room to talk," Rachel muttered.

"Pardon?"

"What was all that with Jo back there? Did you really have to destroy their kitchen just to flirt with her? Surely there are easier ways of getting female attention."

"Easier, yes, but I find the "chat them up after dinner" approach that you favor to be not quite as fun." Balthazar grinned triumphantly at Rachel's disgruntled look. It had been a secret motto of his for the past two years, since growing a sex drive, that any vestiges of shame he might feel over his romantic exploits were useless and moreover fodder for his siblings' cannons. "I'll get to you later, Rache; right now I'm teasing Cassie."

Balthazar pushed himself up so he could turn his head and rest his chin on the back of the seat. Castiel didn't look back at him, but Balthazar could tell that Castiel could sense the manic grin he was wearing, and that made the experience altogether satisfying regardless. "You were quite cute,
you know. Nestled up against him on the porch steps." He reached over, tapping Castiel on the shoulder as if he had never grown past adolescence. "You did at least get a kiss, right?"

"Balthazar!" both Rachel and Samandriel scolded in tandem.

"What? Do you two know something I don't know?" Balthazar turned as much as his seatbelt would let him. "Out with it, Cassie. Your continued silence is only going to convince me that you somehow messed it up."

Castiel hated it when Balthazar trapped him like that.

"Come on, Balthazar, knock it off," Samandriel chided.

No dice. "Uh-oh. Cassie, don't tell me you actually messed it up. What was it? Did he slap you? Did you miss?" Castiel gave the minutest of twitches at the latter question, which anyone but Balthazar (and perhaps his mother and Gabriel, and Rachel, though she wouldn't have taken advantage of it) might have missed out on. "Oh dear God, you missed."

"All right, enough," Rachel growled, grabbing Balthazar and tugging him back into a proper sitting position.

"I can't believe you missed, you silly bastard!"

"Hey!" Kali shouted from the driver's seat, instantly silencing and stilling everyone in the car except for her husband, who had been nearly convulsing with silent laughter throughout and still had not contained his shaking. "When you're around my kids you watch your mouth or I slap it, you got that, Balthazar?"

Balthazar mumbled something incoherent but nonetheless capitulating in response. Rachel beamed at her sister-in-law and settled into her seat, humming a supposedly innocuous but a rather mocking tune--which she would pay for, as Balthazar would spend the drive home leaning progressively further against her in a successful effort to annoy--as she fished out a book she had left under the seat. Samandriel sunk further against the door, closing her eyes and hoping she could fall asleep as easily as Eliah and Gail, the former having been fast asleep when he was strapped into his car seat and the latter dozing off soon thereafter (Inias was still awake and thinking that he heard far worse language at school, but knew better than to let the thought leave the confines of his head). Castiel remained quiet, resigning himself to ruminating over his blunder, allowing Kali to speak to Gabriel without having to raise her voice.

"Last chance if you wanna call Lucifer and stop in."

"...Nah," Gabriel said, drawing the word out as if allowing himself time to change his mind. "It's late. He wouldn't be happy to see us show up out of the blue like this."

"Okay. Good." The GPS barked out directions, and Kali turned the car accordingly.

""Good"? Don't be so blase, darling, people will think you don't like him."

"I don't." Kali pressed on the brake as a yellow light turned to red. "And for the terrible way he treats our family, I'm surprised that you actually do."

"Everyone picks on their siblings, Kali," Gabriel said, dismissively.

"Everyone does not pick on their siblings' children."
Gabriel inhaled deeply, raising his finger at her. "...Okay, you got me there." The offspring of Lucifer's full siblings fared better in the man's opinion than those of his half-siblings, but those among them that had presented as Alphas were obviously favored over those who didn't. Gabriel had once had to physically stop Kali from taking wolf form and attacking Lucifer when he met the news that Inias had presented as a Beta with "Don't worry, there's still hope for the other two".

"Even I don't say horrible things about his spawn to his face," Kali grumbled, setting up on the brake as the light changed to green.

"Meg and Ruby know the Harvelles," Castiel piped up. "And...so does Alastair," he added, thinking of the conversation he and Dean had shared this morning, and the disconcerted feeling it left in him.

"I take it it's not a friendly acquaintance?" Gabriel asked.

"I was with Dean when we ran into Meg. There was a lot of swearing involved."

"Called it."

"The Harvelles are good people," Kali said definitively. "If they dislike Lucifer's family, I'm inclined to believe they have good reasons."

"They do, when it comes to Ruby, and I'll tell you about it later." He had a feeling Kali wouldn't appreciate her kids hearing about Ruby's drug-related exploits. "I don't know about Meg."

"What about Alastair?" Gabriel asked.

"I don't know that, either."

Unconsciously, Castiel promised himself that, someday, he would find out.

Chapter End Notes

The "missed kiss" between Dean and Castiel happened to me and my girlfriend when she tried to kiss me on our second date. Funny story: when I told her I was using the experience, I said something along the lines of "Castiel almost kisses Dean". She immediately asked "Isn't that every episode of the show?"

"AMAB" means "assigned male at birth"; MAAB is similarly "male-assigned at birth".

The 8tracks playlist hasn't been updated since I don't have a copy of "Hate on Me", but I'll fix that soon enough.

Tomorrow (8/1/14) is Croatoan Day! Have a safe and happy apocalypse!
"Good morning."

Something other than his alarm clock or the rising sun being what roused him made Castiel jolt awake rather roughly, and almost scrambled to his feet the split second before he remembered his temporary handicap and the fact that he was safely at home, having elected to sleep on one of the downstairs couches than struggle upstairs to his bedroom.

"Naomi?" Castiel mumbled groggily, pushing himself up into a sitting position. "What are you doing here?"

"Gabriel called me and said you and Samandriel were both laid up, so I came to check on you. Why, is that not allowed?"

"No," Castiel muttered, rubbing the heel of his palm against his eyes. "It's just...early."

"0800. That's late for me." Judging by her tone of voice, she thought it ought to be late for him, as well. "So what happened?" she continued, taking the space on the couch that Castiel's feet had just vacated. "Why were you in Lawrence?"

"Research." As far as most of his family was concerned, Castiel's jaunts around the country were research expeditions for a book he was writing, the subject of which he kept closely guarded secret. "I was running, landed wrong, and sprained my ankle." That much was true, in any case. "Are the boys here?" he asked, hoping to derail any further questioning in that direction.

"No," Naomi said, her normally composed expression taking on a sour flavor. "Their father let them stay up last night and harangued me into letting them sleep in today. He's going to turn them into useless layabouts just like himself..."

Castiel's intense dislike of Crowley was tempered only barely by the thought that Naomi was being ridiculous. "You can leave him, you know."

Naomi waved her hand dismissively. Damn. "Anyway. How long are you going to be laid up?"

"Hospital said about two weeks."

"Well. Maybe you'll actually get some writing done, hmm?" Castiel recognized her tone as a valiant attempt at sounding sympathetic, and nodded to show that he understood and appreciated it. "How is Samandriel? I tried to go up and see him first, but his door was locked."

"It looks like he has the flu."
"So he quarantined himself?"

"I suppose so."

"Just as well, I suppose. I don't want to bring that home with me. The boys haven't gotten their shots yet." She resettled on the couch, a concerned frown belying her otherwise nonchalant expression. "You've called Dad and Becky, right? They should know. And you ought to take him to a doctor in any case..."

"Samandriel wants to rest. If it gets worse, we'll call Mom and Dad and take him to the ER."

Naomi pursed her lips.

"He is an adult now, Naomi."

"Oh, don't give me that," Naomi snapped. "Samandriel is only..."

"...an Omega?" Castiel supplied, when Naomi floundered and trailed off. "And therefore incapable of making his own decisions?"

"I was going to say he's only just barely an adult," Naomi said, her eyes narrowing. "His seventeenth birthday was two weeks ago. He can hardly be expected to know what's best for himself."

Castiel stayed conspicuously silent, and Naomi sighed as one who has been caught with her foot halfway to her mouth, resettling herself on the couch. "Tell me about your adventure in Lawrence. Gabriel told us you went to a wedding?"

"Yes," Castiel said flatly, letting her know that he had filed her faux pas in an easily recallable place in his mind. "The family I stayed with was throwing a wedding for their younger son."

"It didn't happen to be Jessica Moore's wedding, did it?"

Castiel was momentarily taken aback, before the little shot of anxiety that he felt when he suspected he was being followed allowed itself to capitulate to logic. He hadn't been paying very much attention at the time, but he knew that the Heartland Prophet had covered the attack extensively, milking it for about a week, and it made sense that Michael would have kept an ear out for any of Jess's further doings.

"It was."

"You missed Virgil. Michael sent him to cover it."

"Oh." While Virgil's sense of hearing wasn't quite good enough to be considered a special ability, it was above average, making him invaluable for such stories that required him to be a distance from the object of his research. What with the amount of people who had shown up to the wedding, it was feasible that he and Castiel had not seen, heard, or smelled each other.

Not that Castiel would have wanted to go back home with this particular nephew. As a child Virgil had once stabbed Castiel in the leg with a steak knife, and though Michael and Raphaela had tried to play it off as an unthinking impulse of youth, Castiel had not been convinced.

"So how was it?"

"Lovely. Sam and Jess are a devoted couple and are very much in love. How did Virgil spin it?"
Naomi shrugged. "The story's up on the website. The video is too."

"I assume that I will not appreciate his take on their relationship."

"As I said, read it for yourself," Naomi said, confirming his suspicion. "What were these people like? The family you stayed with."

"The Harvelles are very generous and welcoming people, obviously, as they allowed me to stay two days cumulatively with them. The pack is headed by an Alpha female, Ellen, and her mate, Bobby, who is a Beta. They have two sons, Dean and Sam, and two daughters, Jo and Charlie, who are all Betas except for Dean, who is an Omega. They have two pack dependents, as well: Ash, who is Ellen's brother, and Garth, who is Bobby's cousin; Ash is a Beta and Garth is an Alpha. Jess is the newest addition to their pack; she and Sam will be staying with them for another few years until they are ready to move out."

Naomi raised her eyebrows and inclined her head. "Mmhmm?"

Castiel inhaled and sat up a little straighter to avoid sighing. Even as a child Naomi had wanted to know the details about his and everybody's comings and goings; it had gotten worse when she had taken a post in the National Guard and became used to demanding answers from subordinates, and somehow only grew when a head injury forced her to retire and she went to work with Michael at the Prophet.

"Ellen is the undisputed leader of the pack. She is a very openhanded woman but when she gives orders, the others step to it. Her husband is more reserved but equally no-nonsense. Their children are close and very protective over each other. Dean and Jo work with their parents, while Sam, Jess, and Charlie are students. I did not spend much time with Ash or Garth, but they came across as respectable. The family runs two businesses, a restaurant and an auto shop, and judging by the number of friends at both the wedding and their Thanksgiving dinner they appear to be esteemed within their community. All in all they are a well-bred pack and we will have benefited from making their acquaintance."

Naomi gave a sharp nod. "Good."

"They also know Lucifer's family."

"...They do?"

"Yes, but they are not friendly with them."

Naomi snorted. "Unsurprising. Lucifer isn't friendly with anybody." Naomi had been eleven-and-a-half years old when Lucifer suddenly announced that he had an older paramour with a litter on the way and Dad could go fuck himself; it'd be an improvement over Becky anyway. She hadn't thrown tantrums every day for weeks, as she had when she was a toddler and Eve had left, but she had gotten more clingy over her remaining family, and she hadn't forgiven Lucifer even after Michael pleaded and Gabriel pestered him into drifting back into his siblings' lives.

"Not even with Crowley anymore?" Naomi's husband seemed to have an odd rapport with his brother-in-law; at his and Naomi's wedding he had spoken with Lucifer where Naomi had refused to even acknowledge him. It had cause their first fight as a married couple, occurring before they even left the reception hall.

"Fergus knows that if he and Lucifer still speak, I don't care to hear about it." She stood almost abruptly, pulling on her blouse to straighten it. "I'm going to make breakfast for you five. Would
you like anything in particular?"
"Eggs would be good."

"How?"

"Scrambled." He paused for a second. "If...if we have any Tabasco sauce, you could add that to them."

Naomi cocked her head inquisitively. "Tabasco sauce? What put that idea in your head?"

"It's just something that Dean...something I had when I was with the Harvelles." He knew he couldn't keep the slight flush from rising on his cheeks, and he cursed himself when he felt that pink warmth settle on his face.

Naomi raised her eyebrows again and pinched her lips together. "I'll see what I can come up with."

She swept out of the room just as brusquely as Castiel imagined she had swept into it, leaving him behind to pray fervently that she hadn't yet spoken to Balthazar. Somehow his overt teasing was so much easier to bear than the terminally long wait it took to know if Naomi would give her approval or not.

* *

"Dean Troy Harvelle, are you crazy or lazy this morning?" Ellen muttered, giving her oldest son a tug on the ear as she passed him on the way to the coffee pot.

"I'm both every morning," he answered, jutting out his hip to check hers as she passed him on the way to the coffee pot. "And what's wrong with this? Fruit! Bread! Dairy! Economical use of leftovers! Little to no nutritional value! It has "American breakfast" written all over it."

Said American breakfast consisted of the previous night's uneaten pie set onto plates and arranged on the kitchen table. Ellen raised her eyebrows.

"You can't tell me that if we put pie on the breakfast menu people wouldn't go for that shit."

"I can tell you that you can try that out on your own dime," Ellen said, tweaking his ear.

"What's Dean trying on his own dime?" Bobby asked, shuffling into the kitchen, the door flapping closed behind him.

"Dessert for breakfast," Ellen informed him, as if tattling.

"Alas, I will have to wait for your retirement to experiment with this."

"Dean--"

"Don't."

"Excuse me?" Bobby said, smacking the back of Dean's head. "Don't take that tone with your aunt, for one, and two, don't interrupt her, neither."

"Sorry," Dean mumbled, rubbing his skull where Bobby had hit him.

"Dean," Ellen started again, taking a plate from his hands and setting it on the table. "You're not getting out of discussing this."
"What's there to discuss?" Dean said, feeling like a sulky teenager as he flopped into a chair, and hating that he did so.

"Everything. Literally everything, Dean, since you refuse to actually talk about this." Ellen planted a hand on the top of Dean's head and pressed down, mussing his hair as if she could rearrange his thoughts along with it.

"Because it's pointless. It's not like I'm never gonna "get my dream" or whatever. You guys're gonna retire in like fifteen years, and I can just take over the Roadhouse when you do."

"You can't put your life on hold for fifteen years, idjit," Bobby muttered.

"It's not like I'm slumming it and mooching off you, right?"

"That's not the problem, Dean," Ellen said. "What if something happens to the Roadhouse? I mean, God forbid there's a fire."

"Then I'll help Jo with the Salvage Yard. It's unlikely that we'll lose both our businesses. Ain't we insured, anyway? We'll just rebuild."

"Dean--"

"Look, I'm not taking money from you guys when you've got Sammy and Char in college, ok? And ain't no bank giving me a loan. The horse is dead, guys. Quit beating it."

"Why are you so convinced that no bank is going to help you out?" Ellen slid into the chair beside Dean.

"What on earth did that Bela Talbot say to you?" Bobby added, taking the chair on Dean's other side, rendering him unable to avoid both of his adopted parents' eyes.

"Look," Dean said slowly, putting his hands on the table as if to affect an exasperated teacher trying to educate an especially unteachable child. "Don't pretend I'm anything other than what I am, okay? I've got a juvenile arrest under my belt. I got an Associate's in freaking Liberal Arts. And I'm under three feet when I take wolf form. Strike one, strike two, strike three, I'm out."

"The charges were dropped, you have real world experience in the restaurant business, and discrimination based on type is illegal," Bobby countered.

"Oh, and God knows people never do things that are illegal. That's why you don't have a kidnapping victim sleeping upstairs."

Dean winced as Bobby repeated his earlier slap, and then again when Ellen provided one of her own.

"Whoa, why are we beating up Dean?" The kitchen door swung open before, and then shut behind, Sam.

"He's being a stubborn sum'bitch, that's why," Bobby muttered.

"Well, geez, if that's all it was you'd have smacked his head off his neck by now."

"Eat me, bitch."

"Bite me, jerk."
"Can you two idjits save the eating and biting for actual food? Those mental images are a bit too gross for me to stomach this early," Bobby grumbled.

"Sorry." Sam drifted over to the refrigerator, searching out a carton of juice.

"What're you doing over here so early anyway? Where's your wife?"

"She's at the apartment taking a shower." Sam found an almost empty half-gallon and sat with it at the table, eschewing a glass. "I figured while she did that I'd come over and talk to you guys about this restraining order thing, since we didn't get to talk about it last night."

"I overheard parts of your conversation after dinner," Ellen said, crossing her arms on the table in front of her. "Not much, just the two of you kicking around your options."

"We discussed it more last night after everyone left." They had fallen asleep doing it, which had allowed them to neatly sidestep attempting sex again. "And we've decided that she and I are..." he took a breath "...we're going to head down to the courthouse and file the order together, by ourselves."

"You don't want me to sign it with you?" Ellen asked, her tone betraying no surprise.

Sam shook his head. "It's us that Ruby is harassing. It should be us to file the order."

"And what are you gonna do if they dismiss it?" Bobby asked.

"If they do," Sam said, fiddling with the handle to the half-gallon, "then we're going to get a lawyer and file a discrimination suit. Castiel and I actually talked about this a little last night, when I first got back from the police station, before we came inside. His brother-in-law is a lawyer, and Castiel said we could at least speak to him about it."

"Is he pro bono?" Dean asked, quashing his sudden instinct to perk up at the mention of Castiel's name. "Or cheap enough?"

"I don't know. We'd have to speak to him."

"What if you can't afford it?"

"Then we'll find one that we can. Hopefully it's not gonna come to that, but if it does...well, we'll figure it out."

Ellen's hands folded themselves together tightly. "And you're absolutely sure you want to do this by yourselves? I ain't got a problem going down there and putting my John Hancock on a piece of paper that'll keep Ruby Masters away from you."

"We're sure," Sam said, not sounding or looking 100% so. "This is...this is bigger than us, you know? It's like what we did with the wedding. People like me and Jess ought to be able to feel safe and protected and like the police give a shit about us. If it takes a lawsuit to get it, then...well, then so be it."

Ellen inhaled deeply and then sighed, nickering her lips as she did so. "Well. We'll see what develops, I suppose."

Sam's pinched expression melted into a weak smile. "You're okay with this?"

"It doesn't matter if I'm okay or not okay with it," Ellen said matter-of-factly, as if any other tone
wouldn't have allowed her to speak in the first place. "You're a grown-up now. I can support or not support your decisions, but I don't get to make them for you anymore."

"Good job, honey," Bobby said, reaching across the table to pat her hand.

"Oh God you have no idea how difficult that was to say," Ellen laughed, resting her forehead in her palm with a sardonic smile.

"But you *do* support our decision?" Sam pressed, his fingers twisting around the cap to the half-gallon.

The corner of Ellen's mouth twitched as she lifted her head to look at Sam, meeting his anxious gaze with a soft one. "The hardest part of being a parent is when your kids go places you can't lead them through. Maybe you'll find this out if you and Jess ever do have kids. Your da--...Bobby and I want to take care of this for you in the worst way," she said, nodding at her husband, "but we can't, and we shouldn't, or so he tells me." She made a face at her husband; Bobby returned it in kind. "We can just...do whatever we can to help you. And we will." She cocked a half-smile. "Although it *is* nice to know that you still crave my approval."

Sam pushed back his chair and stood, going over to Ellen; she tilted her head and pressed her cheek into the kiss he planted there.

"You're a good mom."

"I know," Ellen said cheekily, reaching up to squeeze his head to the side of hers. "Thank you," she added, quieter, into the arm he had wrapped about her collarbone. "You stayin' over here to eat?" she asked, once Sam had let go of her and she had cleared her throat.

"Nah. I should probably head back over and help Jess finish getting ready. We'll head over to the courthouse straight from there. We gotta drop off our marriage license in any case."

"Let us know how it goes," Dean said, an odd strangled quality to his voice.

Sam hesitated, his head tilting at Dean's timbre. "You okay, man?"

"Yeah, fine," Dean said, in a clipped tone. "Good luck, Sammy."

Sam paused again, opening his mouth to press further; Dean turned his face deliberately away, and Sam deflated. "I'll let you guys know how it goes, okay?" he said instead, clapping the hand he had meant for Dean's shoulder on Bobby's as he made his way out.

"You better," Bobby said, a tad half-heartedly, as the kitchen swung shut behind Sam. Once it had safely settled, he turned his body back towards Dean, balled his fingers into a fist, and punched his arm.

"What was that for?" Dean yelped, grabbing his arm with his other hand and leaning away from Bobby.

"What the hell was that all about?"

"You know, I could ask the same thing," Dean growled, his eyes narrowing. "You can't make decisions for Sammy, but you can make them for me?"

"Who's making decisions for you? We're not forcing you into anything; we just don't want to watch you piss away your dreams, that's all."
"Oh the for the love of fu--...guys, for the last time, I'm not." Dean's chair scraped the linoleum angrily as he pushed it back and stood up. "I have a job I love, a side-job I also enjoy, I'm putting money away so I can move out..."

"We're not trying to force you out."

"Okay, so if you're happy having me and I'm happy where I am, what's the friggin' problem?"

"The problem is we knew you when you wanted more for yourself, Dean Harvelle," Ellen said, the legs of her own chair assaulting the kitchen floor as she also stood. "And you are not going to give up on your life, Dean; not on our watch. We raised you better than that."

"You didn't raise me!" Dean shot back, like a stab wound, and if he had actually thrust a knife in either Ellen or Bobby's guts its subsequent clatter to the ground would have been deafening.

"No," Bobby finally said, after a long moment in which none of them moved or blinked or breathed. "You raised yourself, didn't you?"

Dean felt words rise up from his heart into his throat, incomplete phrases about how yes and I turned out fucking fine without you hovering over me and I had a fucking father and he did his goddamn best and oh God I am so fucking sorry. They clashed with each other, locking themselves together in a tight, painful ball that stopped up his windpipe. Ellen's eyes stared into his, hard and glittering; when he turned his head Bobby's eyes were downcast, and Christ, he didn't know which one was worse.

"I'm going to the Roadhouse," Dean finally managed to choke out, thickly, barely. "I'll see you in a couple hours."

He tried to make it look like he wasn't fleeing the kitchen before either Ellen or Bobby could speak again, and nearly made it; a weak but vehement "We aren't finished talking about this, Dean!" from Ellen followed him out just before the kitchen door made it's first swing past the door jamb.

"What on earth possessed you to say something like that?" Sam asked from where he sat, arms crossed, on the arm of the couch.

"Oh, bite me, Sammy," Dean snapped. "I didn't say anything that wasn't true."

"Could you maybe, please, even consider pulling your head out of your ass for five seconds, Dean? Who the hell do you think has been feeding us and keeping us off the streets for the past seven years? I don't give a crap if you were seventeen by then, you got more raising from them in a month than you got from Dad for thirteen years."

"I am not getting into this with you again, Sam."

"No, you're not going to blow me off again."

"Actually, it looks like that's exactly what I'm doing."

Sam jumped to his feet, catching Dean by the arm before his older brother could make it to the front door. "You can't keep avoiding discussing this, Dean. The restaurant or our parents."

"They are our godparents," Dean snarled, yanking his arm out of Sam's grip. "By all means, praise 'em as much as you want, they're wonderful people, but they are not our fucking parents."

"Is that why you're fighting them on this?" Sam shot back. "Because they have the audacity to not
be blood related to us?"

"Newsflash, Sam, I'm not a rebellious twelve-year-old. I don't make my decisions to spite other people."

"Oh, my bad, I forgot. You only make decisions to spite yourself."

"Oh, fuck you...."

"And everyone else is just the scapegoat!"

"You know what, Sam? Go to hell. I'm not talking about this any more." Dean's hand went out to roughly shove Sam to the side, and Sam just barely missed grabbing Dean as he stormed past. He was able to catch up with Dean just before the front door was slammed in his face, coming up only a few paces behind Dean when instead of running down the porch steps he leaped over them.

"Sammy, you better not be fucking following me."

"We're going in the same direction, dickhead."

"Not anymore."

"Dea--" But Dean had disappeared into a flash of golden-brown fur sprinting towards the woods, and Sam was halfway to taking his own wolf form before he thought better of it. Dean's size, in conjunction with the amount of exercise he'd garnered under John, had granted him more speed and agility than Sam could keep up with for any length of time. And if Jess hadn't been out of the shower by the time he finished talking to Ellen and Bobby, she surely was by now.

"God dammit Dean, I don't have time for this shit."

As he turned towards home the hollowness of his words caused them to ring in his ears.

* *

"My baby is alive."

Linda had woken up each morning for the past six months in a sort of fog. She had gone to bed the night before praying to Jesus, Buddha, the Lady of the Realm, and whoever might happen to be listening. She crawled, zombie-like, from sleep in the morning as if she suffered from a perpetual sinus infection: her whole head aching, her nose clogged from the dried mucus that formed when she prefaced her prayers with tears, her eyes bleary and squinted. The rest of the day was spent doing anything she could: hounding one police station after another; plastering Kevin's picture on every available surface, "Post No Bills" be damned; following every hint of a lead; and sometimes wandering aimlessly, hoping to catch a whiff of his scent, until 2 or 3 o'clock came and she collapsed in bed after convincing herself that she was in no fit state to do anything but pray and cry again.

Today she was not well-rested. Today her head still ached from the inadequate amount of sleep she had gotten. But her eyes were clear and dry, and instead of a few more hasty prayers that today would be the day that the only important part of her heart was restored to her, her thoughts were towards worshiping the boy who slept in the bed opposite her and any deity that might have played a role in his return.

Kevin jolted awake when he felt someone's hand on his shoulder, his body almost spasming at the touch. Linda's "Sh-sh-sh..." didn't help; Susan had woken him up in just such a fashion, to invoke
some maternal version of Stockholm Syndrome, and now just as then he rolled onto his side and curled, half-defiant and half-defensive, into a ball.

"It's me, Kevin. It's Mom. It's má."

The weak accent she had retained from childhood, never fully trained out of her by her series of foster parents and something she could call upon when she was feeling impassioned in some way, slipped over Kevin's shoulder and gently pried his eyes open. After a second of hesitation he convinced himself that it wasn't a hallucination, rolled to his other side, and blinked his vision clear.

"Good morning, baby," Linda said gently, with a smile to match. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Yeah," Kevin mumbled, the corner of his mouth still buried in his pillow. "What about you?"

"Better than ever," Linda said, stifling a yawn as she leaned back on her heels. "I'm sorry I woke you up, I just...I didn't intend to."

"It's okay." If there would ever be a time to tell his mother that the past six months had made a very light sleeper out of him, it would definitely be later.

"You want to sleep some more?" Linda asked, reaching out to brush her fingers through his hair. "We got a lot on our to-do list today and you should be well-rested for it."

"No, it's okay," Kevin said, punctuating his statement by scooting up the bed and sitting upright. "What all are you thinking of?"

"Well, we're probably going to be talking to federal agents today," Linda said, standing. "Hopefully that won't take too long, because we need to pack up. I'm hoping Ellen and Bobby will let us prevail on them for another day, but if they need us to go, we should be ready..."

"Why do you want to stay?"

"I want to talk with them more about our ideas for this organization," Linda said, and the mattress squeaked as she sat upon it, next to her son. "I want some more concrete plans to take back with us. I don't want this to get lost in the shuffle of moving back home, getting you back to school, getting me back to work..."

"You sure you don't just wanna...take a breather? Settle in first?"

"I don't think I could," Linda said, passing a hand through his sleep-mussed hair. "God knows when I'll find a job again. I have to do something to keep me occupied in the meantime."

"You're really gung-ho about this," Kevin said softly, his gaze drifting downwards.

Linda's hand reach out to cover his; her fingers twitched in the effort to stave off the death grip they wanted to give him. "If something like what we're planning had already been in place," she said, her voice oddly strangled, "I might have gotten you back sooner."

Kevin's mouth opened of its own volition; he closed it as soon as he realized what had happened, but too late.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." Kevin pulled his hand out from under his mother's, and his legs out from under the
"Kevin, I haven't ever fallen for that and I won't start now." She tried to smile teasingly, encouragingly at him. "What's going on in that genius brain of yours?"

"It's really not important." Kevin swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up.

"Kevin." He only stilled when Linda took his arm, not having the will or energy to turn. "You are the most important thing in the entire world."

"I want to pretend this never happened."

"...I'm sorry?"

"I want..." Kevin started hesitantly, unsure of how to parse her tone and now hands-shakingly scared to blurt out anything else. "I just want to...to go home right now. Nothing...nothing else."

"Kevin..." Linda stood, coming to face him as he still hadn't been able to turn and face her. "We can't just--"

"Yes, yes, we can," Kevin stammered, averting his eyes from hers. "We can go home and live like real people."

"We are real people, Kevin," Linda said, nearly wincing at the sharp edges at the corners of her otherwise soft words. "This really happened. And we have to face it. We have to...we have to do something about it."

"Can't we just--"

"No, we can't "just"," Linda said, more snappishly than she wanted to. "Everyone else in the world did "just" and that's how those...those sorry excuses for people got away with what they did."

"Mom--"

"And let me tell you something, Kevin; those kinds of people are everywhere. They are everywhere and they will destroy your entire life if you let them."

"This isn't about the war," Kevin wanted to say, but the paralysis had spread to his vocal chords, leaving his mind as the only active part of his body. He didn't have to look into her eyes to know that the light in them had changed and that he had lost her. There were things in his mother's life that he couldn't touch, even if now (he realized with a knot in his stomach and in his throat) he had become one of them.

"You can't just sit around and ride out the storm, Kevin. That's not how things change. That's how people get killed; that's how people lose their families."

"You didn't lose me," Kevin managed to force out, in a whisper so soft he hoped that she hadn't heard it.

"Yes I did," she shot back, and Kevin felt his insides shrink in on themselves. "I lost six months of you that I will never get back. They took that from me and they took that from you, too. Don't you get that?" she demanded, when Kevin made no move to respond. "Are you just...okay with what they did to you? Did you just accept that this is something that would happen to you? That some sick assholes could just...take away your home and your freedom and your entire life for shits and giggles? Just because they could?"
In the absence of any other implication, Kevin's continued silence seemed to be a disagreement, even a gesture of defiance, and the way she took his chin and wrenched his face so he finally looked her in the eye was rougher, meaner, because of it.

"You listen to me right now and you listen good, Kevin Tran. I don't care what you are or what anyone has led you to believe. You are *not* powerless, and no one will *ever* take anything from you ever again."

She vanished from the room like the cessation of a sudden storm. Kevin tried to convince himself, through the unshed wetness that stung like needles at the corner of his eyes, that his will had gone with her voluntarily.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the super long wait, guys. I had a nasty bout of writer's block, which was exacerbated by starting a full-time job (which is stressful, tedious, and exhausting all three...seriously I fucking hate my job), doing three shows, restarting chorus rehearsal, and performing a decent handful of weddings.

This chapter was a weird one to write, also, as its basically a prologue to next chapter. I hope it didn't feel too much like me spinning my wheels.
"Compersion" is an awesome word I just recently learned which is an "empathetic state of happiness and joy experienced when another individual experiences happiness and joy"...the opposite of schadenfreude, basically.

Since I'm not planning on writing Benny/Dean/Cas, I wound up envisioning Benny as being essentially a Kinsey 1 sexually, but a Kinsey 3 romantically...someone who is only just barely bisexual, but pretty safely biromantic.

"Is Ben here?"

"Wha--?" Benny looked up from where he had been hammering a tent peg into the ground to find Dean looming over him, his normally course voice roughened even further from being out of breath and obviously infuriated. "...Kind of," Benny said carefully, after a moment. "He was getting underfoot so I sent him to entertain Garth for awhile."

"Good. I don't want him to see me like this. What do you have that I can break?"

"Uh~...nothing, really." Dean scoffed. "But feel free to have a go at this tent peg." Benny nearly fell backwards as Dean swooped down and grabbed the hammer from his ex's hand. "Gotta warn you though, the ground's pretty hard, almost froze..." He trailed off as Dean immediately smashed the peg half an inch into the ground. "Well. Someone's in rare form this morning. What happened?"

"Nothing. Dumb fight with my family," Dean ground out, striking the tent peg with the hammer again; it drove in too far, and he turned the implement around to wrench the peg free.

"Brother, a "dumb fight with your family" is you and Sam quibblin' over whether licorice is fit for human consumption, and that doesn't turn you into the Incredible Hulk."

"I don't wanna talk about it, okay?" Dean snarled, brandishing the hammer as though he meant to hit someone with it. "It's my business. No one's else."

"Fair enough," Benny said lightly, standing up. "I'll go set up the other pegs. You eat anything yet?"

"No," Dean said through gritted teeth; pulling the peg out was proving to be a more difficult task than driving it in.

"I'll get a fire going. Cook us up some eggs if you want."

"Whatever."

Benny drifted away in the inconspicuously noticeable way he had somehow perfected since Dean had first met him. By the time Dean had torn the peg from the ground Benny had begun humming some French song as he gathered up the rest of the tent pegs and placed in them in a rough
approximation of their ultimate resting place. It morphed into gently lilting nonsense syllables by the time he began gathering up stray sticks to serve as kindling, and once he began breaking them he had begun almost-dancing in place, snapping each stick over his knee in time to the beat he kept.

"Ouais, je dérive encore / Vers je ne sais quel remords / Y a l’vase qui déborde, ça c'est sûr..."

"Dammit Benny," Dean muttered, standing up and dropping the hammer to the ground with a soft thud. "Stop trying to distract me."

"Ouais, je m'divise encore...why, is it working?" Benny asked, bobbing his head and body from side to side as he weaved his way towards Dean. "Entre mes souhaits et mon sort / Assis là j'essaie d'être sûr...you used to like this song. Ouais, je médite encore / Sur les aspects des deux bords..."

He was abruptly stopped when Dean's hands shot forward, grabbed his head, and smashed their faces together. It wasn't quite a kiss, even though their lips brushed each other's; nor was it quite an embrace, even though Benny placed his own hands on Dean's head and held onto him for a long moment. Nevertheless Benny felt the rigidity in Dean's body melt a little once the gesture was returned, and his lips quirked in compersion.

"Can't tell if that was a "yes it worked" or not," Benny said, with a sort of delicate joviality, as he stepped back and freed himself from Dean's hold.

"Sorry," Dean muttered, turning and crouching down to retrieve the hammer.

"No, it's all right; clearly you needed that." Benny hesitated, watching Dean silently drift over to another tent peg and set to work on it. "Brother, you're not actually thinkin' about us...?"

"Ha. Is it such an awful thought?" Dean bit out, narrowly avoiding hammering his fingers into the dirt.

"Well, now, I wouldn't say awful; just that there's someone who'd be sore disappointed if you and I got back together."

"Yeah. Right."

"Run that by me again, brother?"

"I'm just saying," Dean muttered. "There is a big part of you that Andrea isn't really fond of."

"Touché," Benny said slowly, with a guardedly blank expression. "Maybe let's not go down this road right this moment? It's a bit early for you to be critiquing my life choices."

"Hey, it's never too early for anyone to critique my life choices; why do you get special treatment?"

"Brother." Benny crouched, laying a heavy hand on Dean's shoulder. "What happened?"

"I don't really wanna talk about it."

"Maybe not, but you do seem intent on punishin' me for it, so I think it's only fair I get to know what's eatin' at you."

Dean rolled his eyes, sighed loudly, and then leaned back on his heels, seating himself firmly on the ground.

"When I told you that I was giving up on having my own business, do you recall what your
reaction was?"

"I...well." Benny paused, considering how he should respond. "I was disappointed, sure. Was lookin' forward to working for you. It would've been nice." He cleared his throat. "And I was sad for you, of course. Knew how bad you wanted it," he finished gently.

"Do you recall you, say, badgering me at every conceivable opportunity about chasing dead ends?"

"Arguing with you is like punchin' a curtain, brother."

"And that is why you and I don't fight."

"You know your folks are just--"

"I know what they just. And I just want them to stop."

Benny inhaled deeply, and exhaled it wisely, avoiding a dramatic sigh that would provoke Dean similarly to how a matador's cloak would provoke a bull. Dean didn't hear from Benny again until after he had struck a match to toss onto the sticks he had gathered, gone to the cooler to fetch eggs, searched out the battered skillet he kept for camping trips, and began cooking the first part of their collective breakfast.

"Would you let Ben give up in the same circumstances?"

"Ben will never have the same circumstances." The words were a promise even more than they were a statement of fact.

"Hypothetical."

"This is stupid."

"Indulge me, brother. Putting aside everything else, it's still possible that Ben will present Omega in a couple years. What would you tell him then?"

"It's not just the Omega thing, Benny, jeez."

"Then what's the rest of it, brother?"

"You're burning the eggs," Dean said tightly, as if his jaw had been wired shut.

Benny glanced behind him; it hadn't been a terribly smooth feint but it was nonetheless a truthful one, and a forked stick that Benny had picked up was quickly applied before breakfast was ruined. When he turned back to face Dean, he found himself staring at thin air; a quick glance around showed Dean busying himself with...something over by the pile of supplies Benny had dragged out of his car and unceremoniously dumped all over the ground.

"Now where is that bright-eyed and bushy-tailed guy I met all those years ago?" Benny crooned more than called over to him, his tone expertly teetering on the edge of teasing flirtation and serious inquiry. "Whatever happened to him?"

"You dumped him, remember?" Dean tossed back, walking a similar line between facetious and bitter.

"Fair enough." Benny poked at the nearly-cooked egg yolk with his stick, gently shaking the beaten-up old skillet for good measure. The food held a numb fascination for him, and he gazed into it with sad eyes and half-smiling lips. "You know I'm sorry about that, brother. Truly, I am."
"Forget it, Benny. Wasn't your fault. It's not like I didn't know what I was getting into."

"Well, I'd say it partially was my fault," Benny argued softly, suddenly acutely aware of the scent of his own androphilic pheromones, and how faint it was in comparison to its gynophilic counterpart. "I treated you like a science experiment, brother."

"Shit, Benny, I'm just yankin' your chain; I'm not still upset," Dean scoffed, as if he hadn't clutched a bottle for a full month after Benny gently requested that they no longer sleep together now that Lisa was gone and likely not coming back, trying to drown out the memory of every stiff, uncomfortable look that came to Benny's face whenever Dean gave or even just offered him a blowjob.

"Nonetheless, brother, I meant what I said back then. You deserved more'n what I was offerin' you. And right now, you deserve more'n what you're offerin' yourself."

"Yeah, well." Dean picked up a piece of rope to put it down two feet away. "People don't always get what they deserve."

"No," Benny conceded slowly, "but tryin's the whole point, no?"

Dean was spared the indignity if trying to come up with a counter-argument by a happy cry of his name coming from the direction of the lake. Ben, dragging Garth by the hand, was attempting to sprint down the gangplank tethering Garth's houseboat to dry land.

"It lives," Benny groaned, and partly out of a desire to help, but mostly out of a desire to hold what could have been his, Dean intercepted Ben when he got to them, tossed him up a few inches into the air, and caught him before he could plummet the same distance.

"You hungry, buddy?" Dean asked. "Your dad's making breakfast."

Ben surveyed the firepit with moderately interested eyes. "Can I show you something first?"

"There's a rock formation around here shaped like a butt," Garth explicated helpfully, in Dean's opinion entirely too gleeful about it considering both his age and the time of day.

Dean glanced at Benny, who rolled his eyes. "Take 'im. It's gonna take me awhile to get all this cooked up."

Permission thus acquired, Ben squirmed his way out of Dean's arms and burst into wolf form as soon as his feet touched ground, taking off immediately thereafter.

"Don't run into the road!" Benny and Dean yelled simultaneously as Ben approached the street Linda had frantically sped down just the previous day.

"I'm the one who knows where it is!" Garth added, and Dean staggered back to avoid getting knocked over as Garth assumed his own wolf form.

"Jeez, which one is the four-year-old?" Dean muttered through gritted teeth while Benny couldn't contain a guffaw; Dean only had time to make a face at him before taking wolf form and tearing off after Ben and Garth, who had crossed the street after dutifully checking to make sure no cars were coming. Dean made no such token attempt at regard for his own safety, though he made it across with no incident.

Despite his mad dash into the street Ben seemed to be in no hurry by the time Dean caught up with him; instead he was weaving his way around Garth's feet in a surprisingly unsuccessful attempt to
trip the man up. Dean gave him a playful growl as a two-second warning before snapping Ben up by the scruff of the neck in his jaws. Ben yipped as he might have laughed in human form, kicking his legs; Dean gently swung him from side to side, making him howl. A little twinge of wistfulness ran through Dean, as he realized how grateful he was that Ben wasn't that big for his age. It'd be another six years before Ben matched Dean in dimensions, and by then they'd all know if he was going to get any bigger. And he probably would, considering who his parents were. Of course, there was always the possibility that someone in Benny's family had passed on the necessary biomaterial to make Ben present as Beta or Omega, but that seemed like a small chance. More than likely in ten years Ben would be well on his way to almost six feet, and Dean would be stuck barely able to peep over a kitchen chair.

He hadn't realized he'd gotten lost in thought until Garth, who had somehow plodded his way to the front of the tiny pack, suddenly balked, and Dean very nearly sprawled head-over-paws to avoid crashing into him, dropping Ben in the process. His snarl was cut off by Garth's tail smacking him in the face, and the consequent snap of his jaws around the offending tail averted when Garth gave a low whine of caution. Dean reached his paw out, scooping Ben up and dragging him back before he could wander too far ahead, as Garth slipped back into human form.

"Who's there?" Garth called, and Dean placed his mouth around Ben's neck, ready to grab him up and run if need be.

No one answered. Garth inhaled deeply, and then sniffed the air; the scent was faint, but growing steadily stronger as the moments passed.

"It's an Omega, whoever it is," Garth informed Dean and Ben, who both made sure to look up at him with eyes that said that they had already parsed that. "Hey, look, we're cool," Garth half-yelled. "You don't have to hide; we're not gonna attack you or anything."

Again silence greeted him. Garth let out a perplexed sigh and sniffed the air again. "Doesn't smell like anyone I know, you?" Dean whined to the negative; Ben yipped to the same effect. "Okay, well, if you're not gonna show yourself, we're gonna assume that you're up to no good out here," he called. "Our best friends are cops. We can call them, say someone's trespassing on our territory..."

Bushes rustled, just slightly enough to be either a jerky movement of fear, or perhaps another animal. By this time, however, the unknown Omega's scent was becoming clearer, and in conjunction with the noise their hiding spot was now clear. Dean put his nose down and nudged Ben out of the way with it, towards Garth, and padded forward.

Two seconds later something solid rammed into him, knocking him sideways and almost off his feet. Dean barely had time to recover before his assailant lunged at him again--Alpha, female he was able to process, before skirting out of her way; adolescent he added wryly, as he turned and saw her gangly form trip over itself as she tried to reorient herself. She was slightly bigger than him, meaning she could only be around twelve years old, and Dean would have felt bad about fighting her had she not thrown herself towards him again, this time with her teeth bared.

She never made it. Instead she slammed into Garth, who had used her moment of clumsiness to slip into wolf form and jump into the fray. She tripped backwards from the force of the collision and fell; Ben shot forward, barking frantically into her face, and before Dean or Garth could haul him off a tiny Omega puppy ran out from somewhere amongst the surrounding bushes, howling pitifully but nonetheless bravely.

In the moment it took Dean to resume human form, and Garth to put two firm paws on the Alpha female's back and pin her to the ground, they realized that the puppy was far too young to have presented as anything yet.
"Okay, so, what the hell," Dean said, after getting his humans legs under him and clearing his throat. "Either of you two mind tellin' us what you two are doing picking fights on someone else's territory? Ben, hush."

The Omega puppy had been cowed into silence by Ben's persistent barking; at Dean's command Ben ceased, backing off but still letting out a low warning growl. Dean crouched, pushing Ben gently further out of the way; he saw the puppy wince at the movement and fold in on himself, pressing closer to the ground.

"Hey, it's okay, little guy," Dean said, offering the back of his hand for the puppy to sniff; the Alpha female growled, and Garth pressed down a little harder, holding her in place. "Name's Dean," he continued. "Dean Harvelle. You got a name, kid? Where're you from?"

The little one had begun shaking, and flinched when Dean set a hand on his head. The Alpha girl released a vicious growl and nearly struggled her way to her feet before Garth pinned her securely again.

"Hey, hey, you're fine, no one's gonna hurt you, buddy," Dean said, brushing the back of his fingers against the puppy's head. "Look, why don't you switch back to human form and tell me what you two're doing out here? Maybe we can get you guys back home."

"He doesn't have a home to go back to, dingus," a female voice grumbled, and Dean looked up to see the Alpha female now standing, Garth's hands gripping her arms to keep her from bolting.

"Yeah well excuse me for not being psychic," Dean bit out. "Mind giving me your name? Or can I just call you Xena, since you got your warrior princess all up in my face?"

"Eat me."

"Xena it is, then. Does this make the little guy Gabrielle? Or are you Joxer?" Dean addressed his last question to the Omega, who was still trembling but now apparently felt emboldened enough to look Dean in the eye. "Joxer the Mighty? That's you, right? You know what I'm talking about?" Perhaps despite himself, the puppy made a noise indicating that he did not. "No? He's every man's trusty / He's every woman's fantasy / Plus he's goo~d company"...really? Man, kids these days. Who's raising you?" He flicked his gaze back up to the girl. "Who's letting you two run around someone else's territory?"

"No one's letting us do anything and in case you didn't figure it out, we're trying to get out of here," she bit out.

"Yeah, well, now we're not letting you two go running off."

"You can't keep us here!"

"Ah, well, technically we can," Garth interjected. "According to the great state of Kansas we can hold trespassers for up to twenty-four hours so long as the cops are called."

"Also since you two are, well, minors, we're not just going to let you wander off," Dean added.

"Are you wearing contacts?"

"Am I...what?" Dean blinked.

"Lemme see your eyes," the girl said, as if his surprise and not her demand were unreasonable. "Both of you."
"Um...okay?" Dean stood, giving the pup a few pats on the head as he did so; from the corner of his eye he saw Ben, still in his own wolf form, trot forward to inspect the new stranger. The girl grabbed his face and wrenched it forward as if she were trying to yank it off when he got to her, peering into his eyes with a focus intense enough to burn. After an eternal ten seconds she released him, apparently satisfied, and then turned to give Garth the same treatment.

"Mind telling us what that was about?" Dean asked.

"Yeah, actually, I do," the girl said, tossing her head with an air of feigned superciliousness once Garth passed her inspection. "You don't need to get involved."

"Uh, when you say something like that, I think I absolutely need to."

"Dean?" All heads turned towards the direction Dean, Garth, and Ben had come from; Benny stood a short distance away, looking nonplussed. "Why're there...who're these two?" he redirected mid-sentence.

"They were wandering around out here," Dean said, catching the girl's eye when he deliberately didn't mention her attacking him. "Uh...they haven't actually told us their names yet. Been thinking of them in my head as Xena and Joxer."

"...All right," Benny said slowly. "Anyway, brother, there's a pair of suits pulling up to the restaurant...?"

"Oh, ah, yeah. They're here to interview Kevin and his mom. See if they can get anything useful out of them."

"Wait, suits?" the girl piped up. "Like, feds?"

"Maybe," Dean said nonchalantly.

Her face lit up like the Christmas lights people were already stringing their yards with as she turned towards the little boy, who was stiffly allowing Ben to suss him out by way of olfactory system. "Now's our chance, kiddo. Let's go."

"Whoa, hold up, you need the feds for whatever your issue is?" Dean said.

"I told you, it's none of your business," the girl shot back imperiously.

"When you're on my pack's turf it is my business, Xena."

"My name isn't fucking Xena!"

Without missing a beat Dean turned to Benny. "Her name isn't Xena?"

"Her name isn't Xena," Benny returned, still bewildered but immediately catching the joke.

"I thought her name was Xena," Garth added blithely; whether or not he also caught the joke was academic.

"What the hell are you three on about?" the girl demanded.

"Before your time, Xena," Benny said, with a smirk.

"It's Krissy, okay?" she snapped, looking for all the world like she wanted to stomp her foot. "My name is Krissy."
"And your..." the little Omega's scent didn't mark him as a relative of Krissy's "...friend?"

"Timmy," a small voice said from behind Dean, and he turned to see both Ben and the Omega had resumed human form. "My name is Timmy," he said, a little louder but no more confidently.

"Okay, Krissy and Timmy," Dean took over. "What do you need the feds for?"

"I think that maybe if we bring them back to the house, we'll find out," Garth put in, correctly noting that Krissy looked as though she planned on attempting to shut down Dean's inquiry again. "Butt Rock's gonna have to wait, Ben," he directed at the boy, sounding more regretful about it than he probably should have, being an adult. "Promise I'll take you to see it later."

"Oka~y," Ben dragged out, with a pout clearly decorating his features.

"Maybe you can bring your new friend, once we get this all squared away," Benny offered diplomatically, side-eyeing Dean even as he said so. With a few long strides he crossed to the two little boys and scooped his son up, throwing him over his shoulder amidst semi-reluctant shrieks and giggles. "Come on, let's go visit with Dean's family for a bit. We'll introduce them to Krissy 'n' Timmy. How's that sound?"

"Okay," Ben acquiesced, kicking his feet and narrowly avoiding striking his father's face.

"I'm sure they're gonna love this," Dean muttered, his eyes making the slightest of rolls in his head. "Come on, Joxer. Let's get going."

The strange, quasi-hissing noise Krissy made in his direction took him aback, and it wasn't until the boy took his proffered hand with a strange, almost resigned matter-of-factness that Dean realized why she had not wanted him to touch Timmy. Ironically the realization of it made him clutch the little Omega's hand tighter, and it took all his willpower not to scoop the child up in his arms and carry him for the rest of their lives.

Chapter End Notes

Dean, Benny, and Garth are paraphrasing a scene from Empire Records (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IK-ABf-bEH0) with the profanity taken out because there are little ears nearby.

You may have noticed that there was quite a long break between last chapter and this one. In the interest of full disclosure, this is the part of the story where things are not as tightly plotted as before. Unfortunately I also have a very draining, soul-crushing, stressful, time-consuming job that prevents me from getting steady work done, as well as other projects, so updates will be slow from now on. Thanks so much to everyone who'll keep following the story!

You may also notice that this chapter is significantly shorter than you've come to expect. That is because nothing else I wanted to write fits into this chapter, no matter how hard I tried to get them to do so. Really, this one should have been tacked onto the end of last chapter. Expect the next one to be longer and more involved!
"Cottontail" is a mix of cocaine and rabbit's blood. In Denmark during WWII, fishermen attempted to smuggle Jewish people into Sweden for safety. When the Nazis started using dogs to search boats, the Danish Resistance developed this mixture, laced handkerchiefs with it, and gave it to the boat captains. The rabbit's blood attracted the dogs, and the cocaine disrupted their sense of smell. The name is something I made up...as far as I could tell, the substance was never named.

Dodge City University Hospital is a place I made up, too.

**Name:** Samuel Jacob Harvelle  
**Sex:** M  
**Age and Date of Birth:** 20yo; 5/2/93  
**Address:** 202 1/2 William St, Lawrence, Kansas, 66044  
**Type:** Beta  
"Your turn."

**Name of Co-Signer (1):** Jessica Lee Harvelle, nee Moore  
**Relationship to Primary Signer:** Mate/Wife
Sex: F

Age and Date of Birth: 20yo, 1/24/93

Address: 202 1/2 William St, Lawrence, Kansas, 66044

Type: Omega

"Why'd you put it in cursive?"

"Because all-caps would look unprofessional," Jess said, setting the pen back in Sam's hand with something of a flourish, to hide the sudden tremble of her fingers. "I'm going to go drop off our marriage license, okay?" she continued, with the practiced air of one attempting empowered nonchalance. "I think the office closes early on Fridays..."

"All right. I'll see you in a little bit." He bent a little, meeting the kiss she gave to him on tiptoe; with a small wave she bade good-bye to Amy, and he turned his focus back to the paper.

Name of Alleged Offender: Ruby Christina Masters

Sex: F

Age and Date of Birth, if known: 20yo, 5/15/93

Address, if known: 422 Cage St, Lawrence, Kansas, 66044

Type: Alpha

Please describe the incident(s) that led you to file this order. Be as detailed as possible:

"How far back do you think I should go?" Sam asked, flicking his gaze up. "The time she got me addicted to demonblood, or the time she tried to molest me in front of my family, or is just her showing up on my doorstep with fake drugs and some threats against my person enough?"

"Um." Amy's faced slightly pinked, her mouth pressing together in a boggled, compassionate line. "...Yes?"

"Ma'am? Can I help you?"

Jess had shut the door on Sam's facetious question, and it took her a moment to realize that she had faded out of reality in reaction to it; her shoulders had hunched, and her cheeks and nose had flared out in a silent growl. She blinked, regaining her bearings, and glanced up to catch the eye of her questioner.

"Oh, Jessica," Ms. Atropos said, once she had gotten a fuller look at the strange blonde Omega snarling in the hallway. "I'm assuming you're here to bring your license to me?"

"I'm sorry? ...oh, yes," Jess said, peeling away the folder she hadn't realized she'd been pressing to her body and opening it up, to pull out the two white sheets of paper bearing her and Sam's information, as well as Pastor Jim's, Bobby's, and Ellen's signatures.

Ms. Atropos plucked the papers from Jess's hand and gave them a quick once-over. "Everything seems to be in order."

"Oh, good," Jess said, forcing a nonetheless genuine smile onto her face.
"And since you managed to keep the ceremony within the bounds of legality, I don't foresee any problems with processing the license. You can pick up your certificate in 10 business days."

"Wait, what?" Jess reached out, lightly brushing Ms. Atropos's arm to stop her. "Managed to keep? You approved of the changes we made."

"Yes," Ms. Atropos said flatly, her face twitching as if suppressing a sneer. "But that did take some deliberation within my department."

"And may I ask why that is?" Jess said, her eyes narrowing.

And there it was...the same condescending look she had gotten when she asked why almost all her professors where Alphas, and why every C-squad for every sport she had played in high school was staffed with Omegas, even in speed-based ones like track where the natural advantage lay with them.

"How you and your husband conduct your relationship is your own affair," Ms. Atropos said, as if it pained her to admit it. "But the state regulates marriage, and by extension, society in general. And for any society to work there has to be a sense of...order. Of purpose. Individuals have to know what is expected of them, in terms of behavior. What roles they are expected to fulfill in their relationship. We don't just worry about it with people like you and Sam," she said quickly, as if that were Jess's biggest problem with her words. "Alpha-Alpha pairs are notoriously difficult to maintain once all the children are born. Too many cooks in the kitchen, as it were."

"And who gets to decide what is expected of these individuals?" Jess asked, like spitting acid.

"God. Fate. Nature. Take your pick."

"I would think the couple might like a say."

"Yes, that line of thinking certainly is popular nowadays," Ms. Atropos said, with practiced deadpan. "Then again, so is divorce."

"Is there another registrar I can give this to?" Jess said, saving herself the indignation of her jaw from dropping and hanging open.

"I'm the only one here today," Ms. Atropos said, pulling back to keep Jess from snatching the license out of her hands. "There is nothing to worry about. Your ceremony was approved and your paperwork was completed correctly. I will make sure it is processed with no issue."

"Please see that you do," Jess said crisply, biting back the "thank you" she had almost instinctively said.

Ms. Atropos turned on the balls of her feet, her heels clicking imperiously as she walked away. Jess watched her go, the urge to slam a door rising with each footprint. The door leading outside beckoned her, and her footsteps towards it matched Ms. Atropos' heaviness and sense of righteousness. The door made a beautifully violent sound as it crashed back into the jamb after being wrenched open and passed through, and the feel of the concrete was suitably harsh as Jess flopped herself down to sulk on the steps.

"You wanna watch where you're going? Some people are busy being arrested here."

Jess jerked her hand, which had fallen by her side, out of the way of a passerby's footfall. She turned her head, inadvertently catching the sun with her eyes, and in the moment it took to regain her bearings she used audio memory to realize that it had been Meg Masters who had spoken to
her. And when her vision finally returned to her, to confirm her aural suspicions, she was able to see that the silver bracelets decorating Meg's wrists were handcuffs.

"Victor! Hi, good to see you again..." Ellen trailed off as Victor took her hand and shook it; she tried to match his grip. "Well, "good"..."

"Yeah, I know," Victor said, disentangling their hands and moving to shake Bobby's, who didn't try as hard as his wife to establish dominance. "I'm used to it. You remember Steven." He stepped to the side, revealing another body behind his.

"Do indeed," Bobby said, with Ellen twinning the sentiment. "Welp, come on in, the water's fine..."

"You must be Linda and Kevin Tran," Victor said once he and his partner were safely in the door. Linda stood up from the couch almost immediately; Kevin, beside her, rose more slowly. "I'm Agent Henricksen, this is Agent Groves," he continued, flashing his badge. "We understand that the past few months have been...traumatic, for both of you, but we need to speak with you about what you know."

"That's fine," Linda said, before Kevin could get a sound out.

"Shall we?" Ellen said, gesturing towards the kitchen; a general assent went up, and the small troupe followed her into the other room.

"You guys know each other?" Kevin asked, as they took their seats.

"Ah...yeah," Bobby said. "We met when me and Ellen were in the process of adopting the boys. These two were assigned to look for their dad."

"We had no luck with that," Victor said. "Even if Mr. Winchester isn't dead, when a person wants to be missing, they usually stay missing. That's why it's imperative that you tell us anything and everything you know."

"Yeah, I...I understand," Kevin said, with Linda nodding vigorously beside him.

"Now, we got the bulk of your story from Sheriff Mills the other day," Victor continued, folding his hands on the table. "A girl calling herself Annie, posing as the daughter of your school nurse, led you to a person posing as said school nurse, calling herself Susan, who abducted you from there. Can we safely assume that they wore scent modifiers?"

"Probably. And...uh..." Kevin glanced at his mother, bracing himself for her reaction, "...they tried to ruin my sense of smell. With cottontail."

"Kevin!"

"So...yeah, yeah, I was high some of the time I was with them," Kevin said, blinking back his reaction to his mother's anguished shout and the vice grip she suddenly put his hand in.

"Was your usage enough to...alter your memories of your time with them?" Victor asked.

Kevin shook his head. "I mean, they couldn't give me too much; if they got me addicted I wasn't gonna be much use to them. They just wanted it so I couldn't smell much of anything a lot of the time."
Victor nodded slowly; by his side Steven diligently took notes. "Sheriff Mills informed us that you are a xenogloss?"

"Yeah."

"And that they tested you?"

"Yeah. With...increasingly bizarre languages, too. They started out with Spanish and French, and then they started giving me like...Elvish and Klingon and shi--stuff like that."

"So...forgive me, I'm not entirely familiar with xenoglossia," Steven said, setting his notepad on the table. "You have the ability to understand multiple languages?"

"It's, um, a little more complicated than that. It's not like I can fluently speak any language besides English." Linda didn't remember very much Vietnamese, and while they both had expressed desires to seek out a tutor or any language-learning tool it was something they had never felt up to. "But if you put something in front of me that's in Italian or something, I could tell you what the author was trying to convey. I've picked up enough by doing that to be conversant in a bunch of different languages, but that's like a side effect. My actual ability is translating the written word."

"All right. I see."

"Now, you were never trafficked, is that correct?" Victor asked.

"No, I wasn't."

"But you were--"

"Yes," Kevin said, flatly, and his fingers ached under his mother's clutch.

"So it'd seem like they were planning on keeping you indefinitely." He flicked his gaze to Ellen and Bobby. "This is nothing like Celeste's experience."

"Who?"

"Charlie's real first name," Ellen explained under her breath, and after a few moments it made sense to Kevin that Victor and Steven had been involved in Charlie's case as well.

"Any idea what they might have been planning for him?" Bobby asked.

"Expanding the business overseas with Kevin as a translator is the first thing that comes to mind. Code--either developing their own, or cracking someone else's--is another possibility."

"Hold on," Linda cut in, leaning over the table. "If you know these people are up to no good, why aren't they behind bars?"

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Tran, when your enemy is this well-funded, it's very easy for evidence to get buried," Steven said.

"And on the surface, they operate no differently from any other foster agency. Kevin," Victor turned his gaze back to the Omega, "a testimony like yours would be invaluable if you could definitively identify the people who abducted you."

"Sorry to interrupt," floated in from the kitchen doorway, and heads turned to see Dean, still clutching Timmy by the hand, flanked by Krissy, Garth, Benny, and Ben. "Hey Victor," Dean continued, with a small wave of his hand.
"Dean?" Ellen said, rising slowly from her seat. "What's this about?"

"We found these two in the woods. Runnin' from somebody. This one," he planted his hand on Krissy's head; she swatted it away, "was eager to talk to you."

"My name is Krissy Chambers," the young Alpha said, rushing forward to Victor and Steven. "My dad is Lee Chambers." In her excitement she missed how the light in Victor's eyes changed. "And that's Timmy Conroy," she continued, indicating her companion, who shifted closer to Dean's leg upon being so noted. 'I busted us out.'

"Busted out?" Steven said, blinking.

"Wait, rewind," Bobby said. "You're Lee's girl?"

"You know my dad?" Krissy asked, rounding on Bobby.

"Well, I knew him," Bobby said, carefully. "Back in college."

"I'm sorry, who's this guy?" Kevin cut in.

"My dad is a biomedical engineer with Dodge City University Hospital," Krissy announced, proudly.

"And one of the most prominent voices in his field against type-based eugenics," Victor added.

"Type-based...you mean shit like the Early Presentation experiments?" Dean asked.

"That's the start of it," Steven said.

"And what's the end of it?" Dean asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, the thought within the scientific community is that once we understand the mechanism that determines type, we'll be able to manipulate it. In utero, or even in grown adults."

"Wait, seriously? Change a kid's type in the womb? That's fucked up."

"That's why my dad is fighting against it," Krissy said.

"Krissy, you were reported missing two weeks ago," Steven said, rounding back to her. "Who took you? Do you know?"

"No idea who they are," Krissy said, as if painfully confessing a personal fault. "I just managed to figure out that they all wear colored contacts in addition to scent modifiers and masks."

"Oh, so that's why you checked our eyes!" Garth deduced blithely from the back of his small group.

"Is that conducive to your experience, Kevin?" Victor asked, flicking his gaze back over to his initial interviewee.

"No," Kevin said, shaking his head. "That's not something I ever noticed."

"Different branch?" Ellen offered.

"Maybe," Victor said, through a frown. "Although there is a distinct possibility that it's another organization entirely."
"You think so?" Bobby asked.

"Saying there's only one group out there using Betas and Omegas unethically is like saying there's only one gang of jewel thieves in England."

"What did they want with you, Krissy?" Steven asked. "You and Timmy?"

"Dumbasses think they can stop my dad by getting to me," Krissy said, the flick of her hair only obviously rehearsed to those with eyes trained enough to see where fortitude was being affected. "They kept shoving meds down my throat. Tried to turn me into an Omega, like that's some sort of punishment."

"And Timmy?" Victor asked, nodding towards the little boy.

"I don't think they turned him into anything," Krissy said, her face softening a little bit as she glanced back at the aforementioned child. "I think they just...triggered his presentation early. Like, he was going to present Omega in a couple years."

"Shit." Victor rested his elbow on the table, pressing his hand to his forehead. "They did it. Someone's actually figured out how to do it."

"But you, obviously, haven't turned Omega," Steven said, addressing Krissy. "So they haven't figured out how to actually change someone's type yet."

"Great, so in the meantime, we'll have a metric shit-ton of abused and abandoned children once testing becomes available to the general public," Victor said, nigh unto slamming his hand on the table.

"And then people like the Romans will have access to greater profits," Linda said quietly, darkly.

"Do you know where you two were, Krissy?" Steven asked. "Were you in this city?"

"Outside it. I could show you where. It's not really much of a facility."

"Abandoned Building is the hot new laboratory motif this year," Kevin muttered.

"Are there others?" Victor asked.

"Other facilities?"

"Other children."

"...At one point," Krissy said, after the words hung suspended in her slightly-open mouth for several seconds. "We were all...we were all in cells, but we could talk to each other through cracks in the walls and stuff. There was Josephine Barnes. And a guy named Aiden, I never learned his last name. And there was another girl, Ella or Emily or something like that; she was all the way at the end of my row so I never spoke to her directly. There were others, too. And they were all Betas or Omegas. The people there were trying to turn them into Alphas."

"Are any of them still there?"

Krissy shook her head. "They've been packing up shop and moving us out over the past few days. Me and Timmy were the last ones."

"We'll run the names; see if any of them were reported missing," Steven murmured to his partner.
"They might not have been. Timmy's parents aren't alive." She glanced black at the four-year-old, her lip twitching sadly. "I think a lot of them don't have families."

"Well, hopefully someone is looking for them. Any of them could be in danger of their lives."

"That's why I ran," Krissy said, her whole frame tightening. "Figured they were gonna try to kill me since the experiments weren't working. And who knows what they were gonna do with the kid."

"Yeah, and what are we going to do with them?" Dean asked, readjusting his hold on Timmy's hand.

"We'll check to make sure he doesn't have any living relatives," Steven said. "If not, we'll just have to find a suitable shelter for them."

"Him," Krissy corrected. "Do you guys have a phone?" she asked, casting her gaze about to try to suss out the actual owner of the house; in her search she missed the poisonous glance Victor shot at his partner. "I need to call my dad."

"Krissy--" Bobby started; he balked when Victor transferred the venomous stare to him, but not quickly enough for Krissy to not hear him and, after a second, fully comprehend what he had been about to tell her.

"...Who?"

"We don't know," Victor said, finally, after several long seconds. "It's still under investigation."

"How?" Krissy choked out, the word falling like a wounded sentinel over a barricade wall; her eyes squinted closed as if cutting off vision could keep the truth at bay.

Steven and Victor glanced at each other, weighing the consequences of telling the truth; Steven exhaled heavily when he realized that Google was easily within Krissy's reach, and Victor nodded his agreement.

"It was aconite poisoning," Victor said, as gently as it was humanly possible to be when delivering such news.

"Aconite poisoning," Bobby repeated under his breath; his eyes caught Ellen's, and her brow furrowed. That's how Kate was killed...

"The coroner said that it was a larger-than-average dosage," Victor continued, his words measured, calm. "He didn't suffer very long." He paused, grimacing at the trembling of Krissy's chin, the painful downturn of the corners of her lips. "I'm sorry, Krissy. He was a good man."

The barricade fell; Krissy's eyes blinked open, and three saltwater rivers poured effortlessly out of them. Her mouth dropped open and she tried to inhale; whatever made it into her throat clawed its way back up, abandoning her in five wrenching sobs that took the strength in her knees along with them. She stumbled forward, catching herself on the back of a chair before she doubled over completely. One hand, white-knuckled, gripped the rung, while the other pressed itself to her mouth in a vain attempt to hold back a scream; a primal, bone-chilling noise that filled the air and caused the two four-year-olds behind her to burst into tears of their own.

"All right Krissy, easy..." Dimly Krissy felt Dean's hand on her back and his voice directly behind her head; Dean had finally relinquished his hold on Timmy, gently pushing him back and into Benny's care while he went forward to the young Alpha. "Could someone get her some friggin'
"water, please?" he snapped at the room in general, and a flurry of movement started around him. "Come on, Xena. We're gonna sit down, okay? That's a good warrior princess..."

Krissy tripped blindly alongside him as he guided her towards the living room; she was vaguely aware of Benny pulling the two young boys out of their way, and of being half-dragged towards and onto the couch, and then readjusted when Dean noticed how awkwardly her back was twisted in his grip. Garth tiptoed in from the kitchen, laying the glass of water he had followed Dean's order to fetch on the coffee table in front of the couch. The front door opened and shut as Benny whisked the two crying children out onto the porch. In the kitchen Bobby swiped at his eyes with his thumbs; he hadn't been especially close to Lee, but damned if he could stand to hear a child mourn like that, and Linda stood, taking Kevin's hand to bring him up with her, and walked deliberately to stand directly next to Victor.

"Please ask us whatever else you need to know," Linda said, keeping her voice soft, as if Krissy could have heard her in any case. "My son and I want to go home."

Victor shut his eyes, steeling himself against their forthcoming reaction and his own frustration at being the perpetual bearer of bad news. "You can't."

"...What?"

"Well, not yet," he amended quickly. "These people are going to be looking for you. We already have people in your neighborhood on the lookout for anything suspicious, and Steven and I are on protective detail for you, but it would be safest for you to not travel. It would be much easier for you to be intercepted en route, than for someone to come after you at a safe house."

"...I see," Linda said, though the hand she had placed on Kevin's shoulder and the death grip he wilted under belied her placid acceptance of the facts. "What are we going...what do we do now? Where are we going to live?"

"Should they stay here? People already know that they're here..." Ellen muttered loudly.

"That was what we were thinking," Steven said, glancing at Kevin and Linda. "If the Romans hear rumors that you're here, they will come poking around. That's why Victor and I are staying here."

"So...we'll be using our names, or...?" Linda asked.

"No," Victor said. "As far as possible we want them to come here on our terms. To that end, you'll be using aliases. We made IDs up before we came to you," he continued, as he went back to the briefcase he had left at the table, popped it open, and began removing items from it. "Also, you'll have these," he said, holding up a round, plastic package.

"Birth control?" Kevin's ability to quip was a surprise even to him, seeing as he hadn't even mustered up the momentum to blink in a long time.

"Funny. These," Victor popped open one of the packages to reveal several rows of dark pink pills, "are much more reliable scent modifiers than any spray. These aren't suppressors; they're going to actually change your scent. And they match, so people will still know that you're mother and son; they just won't know that you're the Trans. They are to be taken once a day, in the morning, and they start working immediately. If you took them right now, within minutes you wouldn't be able to recognize your own scent, let alone each other's."

"Is there anything else we have to do?" Linda asked, with enough tightness in her voice to snap a rubber band.
"Cut your hair, and you," he glanced at Kevin, "grow yours out a little."

"What about school? Work? Can I even touch my bank account?"

"Short answer, no. An account was opened for you early this morning." He held up a debit card. "You'll be able to use it by Monday. As for school, homeschool would probably be safest. Which brings us to where you'll be staying."

"They can absolutely stay here for as long as they need," Ellen said immediately, after a split second glance at her husband more out of courtesy than necessity.

"Your compassion is, as always, admirable," Victor said, giving Ellen a wry smile. "But that's not safe for you and your family. We've already secured an apartment, in any case. You can move in tonight," he addressed the Trans.

"And what about them two?" Bobby asked, jerking his head in the direction of the living room. "Krissy and the little boy. What are you gonna do with them?"

"A shelter," Steven said. "Since they don't have anywhere else to go."

"We should get them out of here asap," Victor said. "We're obviously going get some more people down here to poke around that place where they were being held, but until then it's just Steven and I. We can't look after four people with just the two of us."

"Welp. If it helps, we know a place," Bobby said.

"Redemption, right?"

"Cas told you about it?"

"We've worked with Mr. Shurley before."

"...Huh. S'pose that makes sense."

"And as for your suggestion, Redemption is as good a place as any. Let me get in touch with, ah...Sheriff Mills, was it? The local cops should know what's going on, and those kids will need an escort in any case."

"Phone's yours," Ellen said. "Honey," she turned to Bobby. "Go steal Dean's phone. We should give Cas the heads up."

---

_I hope you appreciate me_ had lit up Samandriel's phone with an accompanying abnormally loud ringtone, yanking her out of the catnap she hadn't realized she had settled down for. Pretending to be sick including faking the need for rest, but it seemed as though she had truly needed it regardless.

_I went to the library like a goddamn grandma_ Charlie had continued before Samandriel could answer, and despite how utterly crappy she felt, she had to giggle at that.

_Thank you. You didn't have to_

_I know. That's what makes me so nice :D_

_XD XD XD_
Samandriel waited for a few seconds, not wanting to seem over-eager. *Did you find anything?*

Charlie didn't answer for a few seconds, and then several more. Samandriel put her phone down, and then immediately picked it up again about half a minute later, in case a message beat the notification noise.

No go. Her finger hovered over the keypad, itching to type, but she could think of nothing to say.

*One sec* popped up after about two minutes.

That was an hour and a half ago. There were only so many chapters in a YA novel Samandriel could read before she had to start singing to herself to keep her mind occupied, and only so many songs she could sing the chorus and part of a verse of before she felt well and truly too crazy to wait any longer.

*Is everything ok?*

:) she added immediately afterwards.

Radio silence for another five terminally long minutes, until...

*Well, we'll find out together. Put on your makeup girl; I'm coming to you*

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