Through the Violet Glass

by Tasyfa

Summary

When Alex finds a strange glass object, he feels as though the mystery of its existence is part of what Jim Valenti bequeathed to him, and he needs to know more about it. What he finds out changes everything.

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Canon compliant through the end of S01E05, plus the high school flashbacks from S01E06, then it diverges. Character-driven with lots of dialogue and a slow burn plot. Alternates between Michael POV and Alex POV as the primary pairing but everybody shows up eventually.

Notes

I know full well this is going to be jossed by the next episode so I'm posting serially as I write, instead of waiting until it's all finished. I haven't done that for a long, long time - since I was writing in OG Roswell fandom, actually - so please bear with me.

I've left it at Not Rated because a lot of chapters will have no more than swearing, but others will contain some degree of violent or sexual content. I'll put warnings in the opening notes for all chapters with such content.
If a reader needs to skip a particular chapter due to its warned content, I'm more than happy to provide a plot overview on request.

Hope you enjoy.
~Tas

[edited to include info on chapter warnings.]

See the end of the work for more notes.
Keep the Home Fires Burning

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Michael banked the fire and dragged one of the other lawn chairs over to his favourite, settling it close so he'd be able to put his feet up. He regarded the set up for a long moment, weary to the point of stupidity, finally picking up the blanket he'd deposited there when he exited the trailer and sinking down into his chair.

"Fuck." The single word encompassed a lot, but Michael wasn't sure there was any vocabulary capable of covering the events of today.

He sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. Lifted one leg to prop his foot on the nearby chair. The movement took an ungodly amount of effort. Michael managed to replicate it with the other leg and get the blanket spread over himself, and then he relaxed into a halfway comfortable slouch.

He didn't know if Isobel had truly understood the revelation that Michael hadn't been the killer. She'd had a total hysterical meltdown and Michael had put her to bed in the trailer, tucking her in like a small child.

His heart hurt. Ten years ago, Michael had had to make some tough decisions, choices he'd had to live with ever since. He had thought he'd made his peace with all that, or at least gotten to a point where he'd accepted his lot in life. Mostly.

But in the past few weeks, almost every one of those choices had come back around to bite him in the ass. And now, Michael wasn't sure which way was up or what to do next.

The only thing Michael was sure of was that Isobel had been right: he was so tired. Of the bullshit.

Of the lies. Of keeping himself separate from everyone and everything remotely meaningful.

Of keeping any fucking secrets at all.

He tried Max again, leaving a message this time when there was still no answer. "Where the fuck are you? Call me or get over here when you get this. I got Iz to sleep inside." He paused, adding in a tone that didn't disguise his fear, "You'd better still be fucking breathing, man."

Michael stabbed at the screen with his finger to end the call. He was worried about Max but nothing short of actual imminent apocalypse would make him leave Isobel right now. Their brother would just have to fend for himself tonight.

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Alex sat on the edge of the creepy pink bed, staring at the luminous... Glass? In his hands. The gold symbols were wholly unfamiliar but something about them put Alex in mind of hieroglyphs.

He looked over at the armoire, trying to remember its contents beyond the detox supplies. Then sighed and left the iridescent fragment on the bedspread while he retrieved a couple of towels from the shelves. Alex wrapped the fragment in one towel, winding the terrycloth firmly. He used the other towel to tie the package to himself, snug against his chest under his shirt, and then he tucked the shirt into his jeans.

When it was as secure as Alex could get it, he turned the lights out in the secret room and made his slow way up the ladder. By the time he'd gotten the hatch closed and the coffee table tugged back
into place, Alex was in serious pain.

He ignored it for a little longer as he washed and dried the fragment, putting it close at hand to his chair by the fireplace, along with a bottle of water, painkillers, and a notepad and pen.

Then Alex detoured to the bedroom. He undressed, stripping down to underwear and a sock, enduring the chilled air on his bare skin while he removed his prosthetic leg, letting out a groan of relief. Alex was going to pay for going up and down that ladder twice today but he didn't care. He'd needed to know if his hunch had been right.

And now he needed to examine what he'd found. Pulling on sweatpants, a T-shirt, and a hoodie, he grabbed both of his crutches and headed back to the living room, dropping into his chair, crutches leant on the arm of the nearby couch.

Leaving the fragment where it was, Alex downed a couple of tablets with the water, watching the shimmery purple glasslike substance. It was dark currently, the gold symbols mere shadows on its surface. Alex avoided touching it as he picked up the notebook and started to sketch the shape of the fragment, wanting to capture the basics when the thing wasn't glowing.

He jotted down some notes after completing the rough sketch, describing the fragment in its darkened state, and then what he remembered from its reaction when he'd pulled it out from behind the wall.

Flipping to a fresh page, Alex set the notebook aside and reached for the fragment.

It felt cool and smooth against his hands. Even the edges, visually jagged, were smooth to the touch. No risk of cutting himself to ribbons, then. Yippee.

The instant flare of colour was the more interesting part. As soon as Alex's skin made contact, the fragment began to glow, the iridescence actively shifting to follow his hand as he stroked over the glass. The gold pulsed into vivid brilliance in the wake of the rippling luminescence and it subsided into shadow again after a few seconds.

It mesmerised Alex. He fitted the curved underside of the fragment over his thigh, finding that it sat there securely enough, and ran his fingers over the top side and softened edges, almost petting. It warmed with the repeated stroking, much like genuine glass would have, but the longer Alex spent touching this weird piece of whatever, the more certain he was that it was anything but ordinary silicon dioxide.

However, he didn't have any other word for it yet. So glass it was.

Alex couldn't say how long he spent sat there, petting the glass and watching the colours ripple and shimmy. Long enough that his thigh was warm from the object but the rest of him was getting chilly because the fire had died down to embers.

He put the fragment on the table and levered to a standing position, hobbling over to the fireplace. Alex balanced himself with one crutch, grabbing the long brass tongs to put a log onto the fire. The burst of renewed warmth was welcome.

Sinking back into the chair, Alex checked his phone, surprised to see how late it had gotten. He eyed the glass. Possibly best to not hold it any more tonight.

He was tempted to call Liz. Biomed might be her specialty but she was pretty good at all the sciences. She was working with Kyle right now, though, and while he and Alex had left things on a decent note earlier, Alex wasn't quite ready to jump into a situation that might require them to spend
lots of time together.

And he definitely didn't want to take it to work. If Jim had thought it was appropriate for the Air Force to have it, he would have given it to them himself instead of concealing the fragment behind a wall in a hidden underground room in a hunting cabin in the middle of nowhere.

No, this strange piece of glass was not for the military. Alex felt like Jim had entrusted it to him, specifically, and he needed to honour that.

He did know a non-military engineer who wasn't connected to Kyle. An infuriatingly intelligent and competent one.

Alex dropped his head into his hands and groaned. God help him, he was going to have to ask Michael Guerin for professional assistance.

[end chapter one]
The crunch of gravel under tires woke Michael. He was groggy, probably due in part to the fact that he was a fucking popsicle. The fire had gone out at some point and he'd managed to pull the blanket up so his legs were covered only by denim. He groaned as he sat upright, chilled muscles protesting. "Not even 30 and I'm too old for this. Pathetic."

He looked over to see the Sheriff's Department vehicle and anger burned off the stiffness. Michael jumped to his feet. As the driver's door opened and a white hat began to emerge, he barked, "Where the fuck have you been?"

Catlike green eyes greeted him as Jenna Cameron stood up. "Chill, Guerin. It's just me. Max is at home."

She bent to retrieve something from inside the car and then closed the door, approaching him with a takeaway coffee cup held out towards him, another cradled close to herself.

Michael accepted the coffee with a brusque nod. "Sorry. He hasn't been answering his phone." He liked Jenna; she was about as straightforward as humans came. And he appreciated that she'd offered the most critical information right up front.

Jenna nodded, taking a sip of her beverage. "Yeah, I'm not surprised. He took a bullet to the shoulder last night. Refused treatment when the ambulance brought him to the ER, and went home to deal with it himself."

Michael choked on his mouthful and ended up spitting coffee into the dirt. "He got shot?"

"Yep. Left wing. His shoulder will be out of commission for a while but he's fine," Jenna reassured him. Michael could see her biting back the laugh at his classy display.

He rolled his eyes and deliberately took a large swallow, letting the hot liquid settle into his body before he began his questions. "So you wanna tell me what the fuck happened? All's I know is that Max borrowed my truck yesterday. His Jeep's here, needs a part ordered in."

Jenna nodded. "Yeah, that's why I'm here, actually. Your truck's at the station now." She paused, watching him. "So's your gun."

"It's licensed. The permit is in my glove compartment, same little plastic thing as the vehicle registration. Which is also where I keep the gun." Michael didn't even have to lie, a fact for which he was intensely grateful at the moment. Mentioning his gun implied that Max had used it.

He could see Jenna relax at the answer. Small signs, a lessening of tension in her shoulders and arms.
"Yep. Found those, just wanted to check everything," she confirmed. Jenna didn't bother trying to hide her smile now. "Evans was shot by Wyatt Long. But he got his in, thanks to you packing. Long’s got a nice bullet wound to the thigh that won't impede us from prosecuting him for attempted murder of a police officer, on top of him murdering Grant Green." She chuckled in sheer satisfaction. "Might even be able to get murder one for that."

"Grant Green is dead?" Michael was starting to think he might need something stronger than coffee. He couldn't quite wrap his head around what all these things had to do with each other.

"He is. I guess the Emporium isn't going to reopen either, cuz Long torched the warehouse where Green had all his stuff in storage." Jenna ticked off on her fingers. "So that's one count of breaking and entering, one count of arson, two counts of attempted murder, and one count of first degree murder." Glee saturated her voice. Then she shrugged. "Potentially; the sheriff hasn't formally charged him yet. Had to get him patched up first."

"That is a lot of charges," Michael said, his slow speech belying the furious pace of his thoughts. No way had Wyatt Long been working alone. He didn't have the brains for it. Michael replayed the list in his head and frowned. "Wait, two attempted? Max and who else?"

"Liz Ortecho," Jenna's tone was flat. "He blew up her SUV and tried to set her on fire."

"I... see." Isobel had clearly been correct: Liz had been in trouble. Serious fucking trouble, by the sounds of it. Michael sighed. "And then he tried to shoot her and got Max. Because Liz Ortecho is definitely someone he'd take a bullet for." After recent events, it didn't even make Michael angry anymore.

"Like that, is it?" Jenna was nodding as she spoke, realisation plain on her face. She didn't look upset, he noted, just mildly disappointed.

"Yeah." Michael offered her a crooked smile. "You know that whole, the one who got away, trope? She's Max's." He could elaborate further, but there was no need. Jenna was already rolling her eyes.

"Oh, for Christ's sake. He really is a teenage girl."

Michael cracked up, Jenna laughing with him. Eventually he caught his breath and stepped close to her, holding out his coffee cup to bump against hers in a toast. "Amen."

Chuckling, she shook her head. "A'right, now that you've effectively disconnected my sex on tap, d'ya want a ride into town to collect your truck? I've got all the info I need to release it."

He glanced at the trailer. There'd not been any noise from Isobel yet. Hopefully she was still asleep; she'd been so exhausted. Michael didn't want to leave her unguarded, and equally, did not want her to wake up and find herself alone.

"Uh," he started, letting whatever excuse he'd been about to dream up go as a vehicle pulled into the junkyard. "You able to stick around while I find out what that guy needs?"

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead. I'll be on desk duty for the next week at least, thanks to my heroic partner, so I don't mind a little delay in the field." Jenna moved to lean against her car, nursing her coffee.

Michael headed towards the bulky SUV, stopping well short when he recognised the man climbing out of the driver's seat.
He sighed, fitting his hands into his pockets as he waited for Alex to walk over, his shoulders hunching slightly. What now?

At least Alex wasn't in uniform, so whatever this was about had nothing to do with the military. Michael wasn't sure he wanted to deal with anything personal but it was less likely to get him killed. Probably.

He sketched a salute as Alex drew close, keeping his tone even. "Airman. What can I do for you?"

Alex held back a sigh. It might irritate him when Michael addressed him that way, but given their last exchange of words at the drive-in, Alex couldn't blame him. "Yeah, hi. I need to talk to you. Um," he glanced at the blonde woman and added, "Privately." He could see that she was from the Sheriff's Department but she and Michael seemed amiable enough so she wasn't there to arrest Michael. Which was a relief to Alex, and also a kick to his own ass that he'd automatically gone there first. Fan-fucking-tastic. So it was personal. Michael wouldn't have minded being wrong. The look reminded him that these two hadn't met, though, and he waved Jenna over, making introductions while they shook hands. "Jenna Cameron, Alex Manes."

Alex caught a flash of wariness in Jenna's eyes and felt her grip tighten a little before they both let go. One side of his mouth quirked up. "I see you've met my father already." And evidently hadn't enjoyed the experience. Well, did anyone?

"I have," she acknowledged. "I was army, so." So she'd had to be deferential no matter what the Chief's behaviour had been like in turn, and her guard going up like that told Alex that his father had, predictably, been a dick in some fashion.

It was all the context Alex needed for now and he gave her a real smile, commenting dryly, "Don't worry, they broke the mould after they made him."

Jenna chuckled, her expression warming again. "I don't doubt it." She looked between the two men, and Alex jumped in with an explanation before she could ask any awkwardly phrased questions.

"Look, I need to borrow Guerin for a while but I'm off duty today and you're obviously not, so do you want him first?"

Michael stifled a laugh. That wasn't a mental image he'd needed, being passed around like a sex toy. Not that he hadn't tried it on Jenna when she'd arrived in town but she'd shot him down - nicely, but a definite no - and then she'd hooked up with Max, which removed her from his list of possibilities anyway.

And Michael had no business thinking about Alex and sex toys at all but his brain merrily carried on while he tried to follow the conversation.

"Uh, yeah, that works," Jenna agreed. "I just need him to come with me to pick up his truck. Then he's all yours."

Alex flicked a glance at Michael; the other man was uncharacteristically quiet in the face of people arranging his schedule for him. Those hazel eyes had a faraway look that suggested Michael wasn't even listening. He controlled the urge to heave a sigh. "Okay, then we'll do that. You guys head into town or wherever and I'll chill here until Guerin gets back."
Finding both people looking expectantly at him, Michael tuned back in to the conversation, brushing aside the sexy thoughts. "Fine by me. Just, gimme a sec." He gestured at Alex, indicating that he should accompany Michael over to the lawn chairs.

Alex did so, curious about what the hell was going on with Michael this morning. It was like the man kept losing focus. He took a seat and tilted his head, "What's up?"

Michael strained to hear anything from the trailer but silence still reigned. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, mentally condensing and editing the last 24 hours. "Look, Isobel is asleep inside. She had a big fight with her husband. We couldn't get hold of Max, who has a couch and everything, so she came here. Cameron has cleared that up: Max was in some altercation and got injured. He's fine but not exactly in any shape for a house guest. And he borrowed my truck yesterday because his Jeep's over there, waiting on a part."

"O-kay." Alex was taken aback by the sudden flood of words. "I... Do you want me to tell Isobel about Max if she wakes up before you get back?" he asked, zeroing in on what was probably the most important part.

At the question, a bright smile spread over Michael's face. For all their crossed wires and shit communication, sometimes Alex just got it. "Yeah. Yes, please, if you could tell her that he got hurt, he's fine, he's supposed to be sleeping so don't call him. That should do her until I can talk to her."

"All right." God, that smile. And a 'please'. Alex had already figured that Michael was genuinely worried about Isobel; he knew him well enough to know how close Michael was to the Evans twins. The relationship among the three of them made more sense to Alex after his time in a war zone. Family didn’t have to have anything to do with blood.

"Thanks, man." The gratitude was clear in Michael's voice even as he started to walk away and Alex just watched him, until Deputy Cameron's car disappeared down the road.

Alex had thought he'd had a strange day yesterday, but it seemed like Michael's might have been equally peculiar, and maybe even more difficult, going by his behaviour. He didn't know if that would make Michael more or less receptive to helping Alex.

Well, he supposed he would find out soon enough.

[end chapter two]
Michael stared out the window, quiet, as Jenna drove. The junkyard was within the city limits but only just. Soft music with a definite twang wafted from the radio and he smiled a little, recognising Max's favourite station.

Jenna eventually broke the silence. "So, Alex and his father, they don't get along, huh? That was my take on it?"

"That is correct," Michael managed in a clipped monotone. But he wasn't any kind of military, and Jesse Manes certainly didn't deserve any respect from him. "Mainly because he's Chief Master Asshole." Damn, it felt good to say.

"Mm," Jenna made a non-committal sound. "Longtime military family?"

"Yeah. All four sons, his own dad, and who knows how many more generations back."

"Thought so," she nodded, pausing her commentary while she navigated a sharp curve in the road. "Men like that don't tend to handle it well when they have a gay son."

Michael just sat there, his mind gone absolutely blank at the matter-of-fact pronouncement. Finally he shook his head and laughed. "Nothing wrong with your radar." It wasn't like Alex was obvious about it these days, not like back in high school with the defiant eyeliner and nail polish.

She chuckled. "My radar is pretty damn good." Jenna glanced over at him and raised an eyebrow. "Except when it comes to you."

"Ha." Most days, Michael would have run through a whole raft of innuendo in response to that look. Today, though, he was tired and feeling bruised inside and out, and what he offered Jenna was blunt honesty instead. "Probably because I trip all of them at the same time."

"Yeah, that'd do it." There wasn't any censure in her voice, only gentle amusement. Which seemed to be how Jenna approached the world in general, so Michael figured if she was still laughing, then it didn't bother her.

He sighed and leaned his head against the seat back, closing his eyes to shut out the sight of the town centre as they neared the station. Michael stayed like that, silent, letting his mind drift aimlessly with the music, trying not to think about anything at all for the next few minutes.

When Jenna put the car into park and turned off the ignition, Michael roused with another sigh, unbuckling his seatbelt. "Thanks, man."

"No problem. C'mon, you'll need to sign for the gun."

Michael followed her into the building and obediently signed the evidence log, tucking the piece into the back of his jeans and the car keys into his pocket.

"You alright?" Jenna inquired as they moved down the hallway.
"Yeah, yeah. Just tired. You know where I was sitting when you showed up? Yeah, I fucking slept there." He rolled his eyes and chuckled, deflecting her easily.

Jenna laughed. "In that case, want another coffee for the road? I know where Evans keeps his travel mug and it's not like he's gonna need it right away."

The uncomplicated pettiness of taking Max's mug appealed to Michael as much as it clearly did to Jenna and he echoed her laugh. "Why the hell not?"

"Plain black, right? Wait here."

He did, and she was back in a couple of minutes with a fancy green thermos mug and a paper bag, holding both out to Michael while she chewed and swallowed something.

"Take the donuts too so I don't eat the entire damn bag."

He accepted both with a grin. Michael had learned early in life that women would want to feed him and it made them happy - and his life easier - if he just took the food. "Yes, ma'am."

She snorted a laugh and pointed at the door. "Your truck's at the end of the same row where I parked. Go. Eat. Sleep. In that order."

Michael sketched a salute with the hand holding the donuts and ambled outside, locating the vehicle immediately.

He was still thinking about that gesture when he pulled the truck out into the town's traffic. Seeing Alex and Jenna bond over being military had obviously scrambled his brain. Michael had only used that faux salute with Alex before, because it was a sarcastic sneer of a hand movement that struck directly at a core part of who Alex was. But finding himself replicating it with Jenna made Michael realise that it was an ambiguous gesture coming from him, because he aimed it solely at someone he did actually respect.

It was a weirdly uncomfortable realisation.

And one he didn't want to spend time on right now. It was enough to notice it and file it away for later.

Like, after he found out what the fuck Alex needed to talk to him about privately.

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Alex waited a few minutes after he'd been left alone, until he was sure that the various noises hadn't woken Isobel, and then he retrieved his backpack and a bottle of water from his car, settling back into the chair.

He didn't have any idea how long he'd be here but he might as well get some more notes down while he waited. Out came notebook, pen, and iPod.

Fitting the earbuds into place, Alex chose a mellow playlist that wouldn't distract him and got to it, scribbling bullet points on a fresh page. He paused now and again to close his eyes and bring up mental images of the fragment, refreshing his thoughts before continuing to make notes.

The memory had to do, because Alex definitely wasn't getting out the actual glass in an unsecured location.
He closed the notebook and clipped the pen to it when he heard the metallic squeak of the Airstream door, turning in the chair towards the sound.

"Where's Michael?" Isobel asked, before Alex had a chance to turn off the music. He did so now, looking over at her, concealing his surprise at her dishevelled appearance. He'd never seen Isobel look anything but fully polished, even as a kid.

"He had to run into town to collect his truck. He was going to come right back so it shouldn't be long now," Alex explained, keeping his tone even and soothing.

She tilted her head, staring at him. "And he left you here?"

"Um, yeah." Alex tucked his stuff into the backpack and picked up his crutch, getting to his feet so he could talk to her properly. "I came by to talk to him about something and he asked if I could wait." He shrugged, indicating his civvies. "I wasn't in a rush."

"Okay." Isobel seemed to accept that explanation but there was a speculative note in her voice that made him groan internally. Great, an inquisitive sister, just what Alex needed. Or best friend. Best friend's sister? Whatever. All of those roles were dangerous.

"Well, I'm going to make some coffee. Would you like one?" Isobel straightened, some of her veneer reappearing. It fascinated Alex. He nodded, moving towards her as he spoke.

"That would be nice, thank you. Before you do, though, Michael asked me to pass on a message." The name tasted strange, unfamiliar in Alex's mouth. He never said it anymore. The other Michaels he knew went by Mike, or Mick. Only Michael Guerin went by his full name.

"A message?" That bit of veneer cracked immediately and her voice squeaked at the end of the question. Alex kind of wanted to give her a hug. He couldn't say he'd ever considered Isobel Evans to be huggable; she'd been worlds apart from Alex and his friends in high school. Michael had been their only point of overlap.

And remained that point, it seemed. "It's all right, it isn't bad news," Alex offered first, adding a gentle smile when he saw the lines of her body relax. "He just wanted you to know to not try to call Max, because Max was in an altercation last night and he got hurt. He's fine but he's supposed to sleep it off."

"Oh my God." Her hand flew to cover her mouth and Alex saw a flash of blind panic cross her face. Then Isobel took a deep breath, letting her hand drop, and a few more deep breaths. "Okay. Okay, Michael would not have left you here to tell me if there was actually something really wrong with Max. He would have woken me. So, I'm going to go make us some coffee, and then I'll be out to sit with you. And I will not use my phone."

Alex simply nodded, agreeing with her, and Isobel gave him a sharp nod in return then pivoted and went back into the Airstream.

He took a deep breath of his own and sat down again. It felt like there were layers of meaning to everything this morning that he just wasn't seeing. Flickers out of the corner of his eye. And just as impossible to pin down.

The rumble of an engine alerted Alex to Michael's imminent arrival before the truck came into view, dusty green and purring.

*Here we go.* Alex steeled himself, reaching for the calm that he'd been able to give Isobel. He knew he was going to need it.
Michael parked and exited the truck. He took stock of the scene as he walked over; Alex had obviously grabbed stuff from his car and seemed to have made himself comfortable, and Isobel was nowhere to be seen. He frowned; she should have been awake by now.

"She's making coffee," Alex told him as soon as Michael drew close enough that he didn't need to shout. "And possibly getting dressed. Although I'm sure there's an audience somewhere for the fetching combination of knee-high sports socks and a lacy nightie."

The dry comment startled a laugh from Michael. "Oh, yeah, somewhere. Here, want a donut? Apparently some clichés are true and the cop shop had a tonne." He passed the paper bag to Alex.

"I could eat," Alex withdrew one of the sweet treats and folded the top of the bag down, setting it on the nearby table. He jerked a thumb towards the trailer. "I told her about Max. She had a wobbly moment but then came to the conclusion that you wouldn't have left if you'd thought it was something serious."

"She's right."

"I know." And Alex did know. But it wasn't until right this second that he realised Michael had trusted him with Isobel - with his family. It was unexpected, to say the least.

"So." Michael dropped into a chair. "What did you - hey, Iz," he interrupted himself as Isobel opened the door, balancing two mugs as she closed it behind her.

"Good morning, boys," her tone was bright and breezy and Michael smiled. She'd changed her clothes and brushed her hair, too, as Alex had guessed she would. Michael was glad to see it, even if he knew that it was partially an act, brought on by Alex's presence.

"Thanks," Alex smiled at Isobel when she handed him one mug. It was good to see her being more, well, Isobel like. He pointed at the table. "Donuts. Help yourself."

She clapped her hands and Alex had to laugh as Isobel tore into the bag and took a big bite, sighing in exaggerated bliss once she'd swallowed. "God, sugar rush. I needed that."

Michael joined in the laughter and gestured at Alex. "How come you weren't that excited?" It felt natural to tease him. Act or not, Isobel's mild silliness lightened his own mood. Maybe they could get through this shit after all.

"Well, this is a mid-morning snack for me, Guerin. I already ate my Wheaties," Alex informed him in a lofty tone. The return volley was automatic, courtesy of long years of piss-taking interactions with his fellow airmen, on top of the years growing up in a house full of guys. But it felt good to be able to do this with Michael. Familiar, and a lot more comfortable than the body blows they'd been verbally dealing each other lately.

Isobel looked heavenward and Michael smirked; he'd seen that reaction to him and Max bickering many a time. She smiled at him and then Alex, addressing them both. "You two obviously have stuff to do and I need to get going."

"Izzy, you sure?" Michael stood and moved close to her, concerned. They hadn't even talked yet.

"Yes, Michael, I'm sure. I'm going to Mom and Dad's. I need some time to myself to think about things, and we can't talk to Max yet anyway, so I'm going to go sit in Mom's big jacuzzi bath with the bubbles on and try to just be for a little while." Her eyes teared up and she sniffled, but she raised her chin and it broke his heart, how brave she was being.
"Okay, Iz. Okay." Michael patted her shoulder, pretty sure she wouldn't thank him for a hug right now. He knew she'd start crying if he tried and she didn't like doing that even without an outsider in the audience. "Text me when you get there. I'll let you know when I've talked to Max and we can make plans then."

"I will." Isobel nodded firmly and went back into the Airstream, emerging almost immediately with duffle bag in one hand and car keys in the other. That was from yesterday's vehicular rescue. Michael idly thought that it was just as well that Max's Jeep was out of commission, because he really didn't want to have to retrieve it from the Sheriff's Department after doing so for both Isobel's and his own.

Alex watched in silence as Michael walked her to the car. There was more to it than the summation Michael had given him before; he was certain of it. But their quiet words hadn't given him any clues, and it wasn't any of his business anyway.

So Alex sipped his coffee, waiting for Michael, cocooning himself in all the calmness he could muster. He'd managed it with Kyle last night, breaking through some of the other man's naivete. But everything he'd told Kyle, Michael already knew. Had known for a decade. Alex had a history with each of the two men, in very different ways.

He focused on his breathing, keeping it slow and steady while he watched Isobel drive away. Michael turned towards him once she was out of sight and Alex tamped down on the flutter in his stomach. *Be nice. You need him.*

Alex could wish that weren't the truth.

[end chapter three]

Chapter End Notes

I feel like a bit of a tease now, lol, but this isn't a 'quick fix' fic and the payoff will come, promise!

~Tas
Michael approached the little collection of chairs at a slow walk, his eyes on the man sat there. Alex looked good. There was a stillness about him this morning that Michael hadn't noticed before, a serenity almost. Michael could use some of that.

He didn't bother sitting down, grabbing a donut from the bag and leaning against the table, facing Alex. "So. Just us now. What'd you need?"

Typical. Alex refrained from rolling his eyes. He didn't think Michael was trying to be confrontational; the tone was friendly enough. It just seemed like the normal state of being for him.

Well, Alex wasn't going to let it get to him today. "It's... An engineering problem. Sorta."

"You have engineers under your command. Why bring it to me?" Michael asked, genuinely puzzled. He didn't have access to the kind of lab equipment Alex could use at work. And he wasn't formally qualified. For anything.

Alex debated what to say, finally deciding on, "I'll explain it all. In private." He got to his feet and hoisted the backpack, pointing at the Airstream with his crutch. "Can we go inside?"

"Inside?" Michael repeated. He'd put his drawings and calculations back up after Alex had broken it off at the drive-in. No need to conceal them anymore with only Max and Isobel coming round.

"Yeah." It wasn't going to be fun for Alex either, being stuck together in the small space where he'd spent a handful of gorgeous nights beside (under, over) this man, learning what changes the years had wrought on their bodies. He knew he'd be able to see Michael's bed from everywhere in the trailer. He knew it was going to feel like a fist to the solar plexus.

He also knew it was necessary. Alex might have thought himself paranoid for being so careful, but he'd trusted Jim Valenti and the level of concealment the dead man had used for the fragment gave Alex a very clear steer on how to proceed.

And, Alex knew his father. If Jim hadn't told the Chief, there'd been a damn good reason not to, and Alex wasn't about to break that trust now.

He stepped close to Michael, meeting his eyes squarely, his voice soft. "I know I'm asking a lot. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important. You're the best person to help me, and I know I can trust you to keep it to yourself."

Michael stared at him for several minutes, shocked into silence. Whatever this was about, Alex was deadly serious, and Michael started to get a nervous churn in his stomach that had nothing to do with Alex's proximity or the prolonged eye contact.

In the past 24 hours, so many secrets had come to light. Michael wasn't beholden to Isobel to never tell Max about Liz Ortecho anymore. And he wasn't beholden to Max to never tell Isobel about her own secret, either. He'd done that. There was more to tell, details to flesh out, but Michael wasn't suspended between the Evanses now, for the first time since June 2008.

Michael only had one secret left. He didn't know if he wanted to keep it.
Alex could tell the instant Michael made a decision from the way his eyes changed, shading greener with emotions that Alex couldn’t identify. He tried to project reassurance. Alex knew he’d hurt Michael in their recent interactions but that wasn’t why he was here now.

Michael nodded, finally, swallowing hard. He didn't say anything, just turned on his heel and made for the trailer.

Alex followed Michael and caught the open door behind him. He leaned against it briefly, making sure the single strap of the backpack stayed on his shoulder, then climbed up and in, turning to close and latch the door before he faced Michael again.

And stopped dead. Complicated equations and schematics covered the walls around the table, and more papers were scattered across the table, along with pencils, rulers, protractor, calculator, compass...

His gaze encountered a squarish piece of rippled glass with a darkened glow.

"Holy shit," Alex breathed. "There's more than one piece."

Michael's brain stuttered. "What?" How the fuck did Alex know about the ship?

"That's, it's," Alex couldn't get the words out as he dropped his backpack on the table and hurried to unzip it. He pulled out the towel-wrapped package and shoved the backpack to the floor, removing the towel and using the vacated space to place the matching fragment onto the papered surface. It luminesced when he touched it and Alex couldn't resist stroking his palm over the glass to bring up the golden symbols.

He looked at Michael. "This is why I'm here."

Michael reached towards the new-to-him glass piece, unable to believe his eyes. He trailed a fingertip along the edge, feeling the familiar smoothness and the gentle warmth against his skin. The way Alex stroked the glass was the same as he himself did, as though he couldn't not touch it when it was right there.

"How? When?" Michael managed, wide eyes shifting to meet Alex's.

"Last night. The how is a little more complicated. But no one else knows. I knew it needed to be kept confidential. And," Alex hesitated; this last part was harder to admit. Especially to Michael. Despite how he'd ended up in the Air Force, Alex was proud of what he did. But it was the very contrast between those two factors that lent weight to his conviction. "It needs to be kept away from the military."

"Yeah. It does." Michael was distracted by the new glass shard; his voice lacked the heat that would be customary with such a statement from him.

He wanted to examine it more closely. Michael picked up the square and offered it to Alex. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours?"

Alex couldn't help but laugh. "Really?" But he slid the curved fragment towards Michael and accepted the square one.

"They look slightly different," Alex observed, watching the glass shimmer in the wake of his fingers. "The bigger one is more of a solid purple. This has some sunset colours mixed in."

Michael grinned at the tone of the comments. Alex was obviously as enraptured by these shards as
he was. A laugh bubbled out, giddy with discovery. "It probably has to do with the relative sizes. The nuances blend together more over a larger surface."

Alex looked over at him, seeing that grin, and he mirrored it. He didn't think he could properly articulate just how thrilling this was. "So unbelievably cool."

"Abso-fucking-lutely," Michael agreed. His gaze dropped to follow Alex's hand moving over the glass, seeing the familiar trails of light. Caught up in the excitement, he spoke more freely than intended. "I had no idea it would react the same way to a human."

It took Alex a moment to actually comprehend what Michael had said, and then his breath whistled through his teeth in a forceful exhale. "Run that by me again."

Michael froze. He looked away altogether, towards the door, but besides the fact that he lived here, Michael wasn't going to run.

At the same time, he wasn't entirely sure what to say. The memory floated up of a dig Alex hadn't even known was a dig when he'd delivered it, and Michael ventured, "Uh... Ho ho ho?"

"What? Ho ho..." Alex halted, mentally filling in the context. At the dairy ranch, when he'd given Michael his notice for vacating the premises. What Alex had thought was a last ditch attempt to undermine the Air Force plans for a new facility, by suggesting it was a historical site because of the UFO crash. Which Alex had deflected with a derisive comment about Santa's workshop.

He swallowed against a sudden dry throat, feeling his heart rate jump. Letting go of the fragment, Alex leaned against the table and pointed at Michael's legs with his chin. "I'm going to need that chair."

Instantly Michael was on his feet and he slid the chair towards Alex, watching as he sat down heavily. His heart was in his throat as he waited for a reaction.

"You're," Alex started, then shook his head. He didn't know how to finish that sentence. Scenes were scrolling across his mind. Strange comments Michael had made that had stuck in Alex's memory. The unusual closeness amongst Michael and the Evans twins. He knew that story, three lost children in the desert. But it had never occurred to him that ---

His gaze fell on Michael's bed and utter incredulity replaced the expected hurt. Alex wanted to laugh and cry at the same time as he realised, "You're telling me that I've fucked an alien."

"Yes?" There wasn't anything else Michael could say. A corner of his brain was really fucking amused that Alex had gone there first.

"Okay then." What else could Alex say? They'd done what they'd done, and they were who they were. One fucked up, broken queer and one extraterrestrial orphan. He closed his eyes, nodding to himself as he sighed. "Okay."

That was it? To say Michael was confused would be a massive understatement. "You alright, man?"

Alex nodded. He opened his eyes and looked directly at Michael. The truths that had drawn them together as teenagers all those years ago hadn't changed, not in any way that mattered.

"Yeah. It's all good."
Michael stood there regarding Alex for a long time. He kept examining Alex's face, checking for micro expressions, searching for any hints, no matter how faint, that Alex wasn't telling the truth. He found nothing. He didn't know what to do with nothing. He didn't know how to move forward with Alex being fine with him being what he was.

Hope for the best and prepare for the worst, the adage said. But Michael hadn't dared hope. He felt like his capacity for hopefulness had died alongside Rosa Ortecho, when he and Max had decided to cover everything up and in Isobel's eyes, Michael had become a murderer. He'd half believed it of himself as the years slipped away.

He'd certainly lived down to it.

"'It's all good'? What the fuck does that even mean?" Michael burst out.

Alex raised an eyebrow. He couldn't say he was surprised by the anger. This was big. Michael had been carrying it around for his entire life. Longer than Alex had been carrying around being gay, and with the potential for a lot more serious repercussions. At this point in history, Alex wasn't likely to get locked away and dissected. But Michael was. As bad as the Chief's behaviour had been towards his own son, Alex knew it didn't hold a candle to the treatment a real live alien would receive.

That sent the first tendril of true fear snaking down Alex's spine. He held tighter to his aura of calm. "It means what it says, Guerin. You're an alien. I'm missing a leg. Nobody's perfect."

The reasonableness of both the words and the tone infuriated Michael. How could Alex be so goddamned adult about everything when Michael was just this side of panic? "How very fucking modern of you, Manes. We should pose for a diversity poster. Look, everyone, it's the gay amputee and the really, really illegal alien."

"Guerin."

The single word was a warning but Michael ignored it. Too much emotion thrummed through him, and he never did have much control when he was angry. "Right, right, I totally forgot the book cover option. How about a Harlequin paperback? The Airman and the Alien Criminal. I bet that would sell like hotcakes," he spat, unable to stop himself.

There were exactly two people on the planet who could rile Alex to the boiling point in no time flat: his father, and Michael Guerin.

"What the hell is your problem, Guerin? Do you want me to hate you? Be afraid of you?" Alex
snapped. "Because I don't. And I'm not. So get over it already."

Michael vibrated with rage. The plates in the cupboard started rattling, knocking together in the tiny kitchen area.

Alex glanced behind him. He couldn't see the source of the noise but he'd washed enough dishes in his life to recognise it.

Well, no, the actual source seemed to be Michael. And wasn't that a kicker? Some kind of telekinesis, thank you Maria for the vocabulary. Alex had to get his own temper under control if he were going to help Michael with his.

He closed his eyes, reaching for the quiet place in his mind that served as his refuge. Alex let the peace of it flow through him, cooling the anger, the way he'd learned while also learning to walk again. No shortage of fury in a veterans' hospital.

What the fuck, was Alex meditating? Now? Michael could see him regaining his composure and the contrast to his own mood just made him madder. He clenched his fists at his sides, breathing heavily.

Michael knew he needed to get himself under control - the pencils were rising from the table, the drafting tools too, and wouldn't that be the cherry on top if he managed to kill himself with a fucking pointy compass?

Floating objects greeted Alex's gaze when he was ready to act. One eyebrow went up and then he ignored it, getting to his feet and taking the few steps necessary to stand in front of Michael, within his personal space but not actually touching him. "Look at me, okay? Focus on me."

Michael's eyes met his. He could see that Alex was genuinely calm again and he wanted to know how that was possible when Michael felt like a tornado was tearing through him. He understood now what Max had been experiencing when he'd blown the town's power grid.

It was hard to be this close to Alex, though. Too hard to see compassion in his expression instead of fear. Michael blinked rapidly and turned his head away.

"Hey, no. Keep them here." Alex touched Michael's cheek, guiding him to come back to face Alex head-on. When he did, Alex dropped his hand to press flat on Michael's upper chest. "Breathe with me. Concentrate on me and match my breathing."

Michael drew a shuddery breath and mirrored Alex, raising his hand to place the palm on Alex's chest, feeling its gentle rise and fall. He tried to narrow his focus to the sound and rhythm of Alex breathing, and the soft shine of dark eyes.

Slowly, slowly, they synchronised, Alex leading them both to tranquillity. He'd spent plenty of time looking at Michael before but not quite like this, and he kept noticing the colour variations in Michael's irises, bits of green, brown, gold, stirred through the caramel. They were stunning, every bit as magic in their own way as the violet glow of the glass fragments. Finally, Michael nodded and looked away, lashes veiling the beauty.

"Thank you." Simple, direct. Michael noted the trailer had gone silent and nothing was visibly damaged; crisis averted. This time. He offered a crooked smile. "I might have to ask you for lessons."

Alex chuckled. "Yeah, doable. But it would probably be better at my place. We could go outside - fewer breakables around."

"I'm not going to the base. It's not safe." Michael's forehead creased in surprised concern at the
"I don't live on base," Alex hastened to clarify. He hadn't told Michael that previously; he'd been waiting until he felt comfortable enough to invite him over. Then the drive-in had happened, and, well, here they were.

"Ah." Michael had assumed, and Alex obviously hadn't wanted to set him straight before. Fair enough. He hadn't been entitled to the information then, nor was he now. "So, when do you want to do this?"

Alex glanced at the table. He wanted to learn about the fragments but it looked like Michael had been studying his pieces for a long time, and more discovery could wait. Helping Michael develop his emotional control felt more critical. He shrugged. "No time like the present. Today and tomorrow are my weekend, so I'm available."

"Let me talk to Mr. Sanders." Michael hadn't anticipated the offer or its immediacy but he'd be a fool not to take Alex up on it.

"Yeah, sure," Alex waved him off, exhaling in a long sigh once Michael left the Airstream.

He knew he could help. He knew it was important, that Michael needed help, and he was willing and able to give that help.

What Alex didn't know was whether he could keep his resolve around Michael. Coming here, into a place where he'd briefly known such joy, had hurt about as much as Alex had expected.

And that had been the only part of it that had been as expected. The rest of the morning... Alex didn't know what to think yet. But he was pretty sure about the next step, and he'd learned the hard way that sometimes, the next step was the only one you could see.

[end chapter five]

Chapter End Notes

For those music inclined, I wrote a lot of this chapter whilst listening to the song Forever, by Mumford and Sons, on repeat. :+)
A silent thank you to my cousins for the endless blathering about the challenges of building a cottage. If any middle of nowhere details are wrong, blame them. ;+D ~Tas

* * * * *

By the time Michael parked his truck beside Alex's SUV, both vehicles tucked behind what looked like a glamping interpretation of rustic, he was thoroughly confused.

The stop at the grocery store had made sense. The cabin really was as far out of town as Alex had said, and he probably didn't want to have to do the round trip again today. Taking separate cars made similar sense.

The sports store, not so much. But Michael had waited there, too, before following Alex for a good half hour of rural scenery.

"How did you end up here, dude?" Michael asked as soon as they were both stood on the ground. He looked around at the trees and shook his head, grinning. "I mean, you, Alex Manes, horror film aficionado, actually live in a cabin in the woods."

Alex laughed. "Yeah, I know. I kind of love that part." It wasn't dense forest like in the mid-west or wherever it was they grew Christmas trees, but for the desert, it was a significant amount of greenery.

"It suits you," Michael smiled, coming over to where Alex was getting his shopping out of the back. Everything had been organised into two large, sturdy tote bags, one with long shoulder straps and the other with short grab handles. He realised Alex would be able to carry both simultaneously on the non crutch side of his body, in addition to the backpack. Michael hesitated, but he would have asked anyone else if they wanted help, so he offered, "Want me to carry anything, or open the door for you?"

Alex settled the straps on his shoulder and glanced at Michael. He'd sounded regular old polite, not pitying, and Alex appreciated it. He dug out his key and tossed it at Michael, smiling at the smooth catch. "Yeah, thanks. It's the door opposite from here, has the key fob design on it."

"Got it." Michael went round to the front, taking a good look at everything on his way. It was well built, neat and tidy, and he guessed the little offshoot from the porch was the bedroom, with the larger section holding the living areas.

The symbol on the door resembled a seashell to his eyes. Atypical for the middle of the country but whatever. It was a nice, solid door and he moved into the cabin to hold it open.

Alex went in and right past him into the kitchen to unload. He had a system and he implemented it now, getting everything put away and folding the empty bags. His backpack, he left in the corner. No need to do anything with that yet.

Michael wandered into the kitchen, still checking it all out. "Efficient," he observed. "If I hadn't
already known you were military, I would now."

"Fair," Alex admitted. "You want coffee, water, beer?"

"Uh, water, thanks." He probably shouldn't have a beer, even if he wanted one.

Alex pulled two bottles from the fridge and passed one to Michael. "Don’t drink from the tap, by the way. I'm on well water."

"Also septic tank and generator, yeah? I can't imagine you get any town utilities out here."

"Not a one," Alex confirmed. "The heating is all fireplaces so I do get loads of firewood delivered but otherwise, I'm totally on my own."

Michael cracked open the bottle and took a long swallow. There was a contentment in Alex's voice, talking about the cabin, about being self-sufficient, that he hadn't heard before. He nodded with a soft smile. "Like I said, it suits you."

"Thanks." The conversation felt intimate now, coloured by Michael's smile, and Alex cleared his throat. "So, I have some ideas on how we can go about this, but I'm going to need you to give me, like, an overview of what you can actually do."

Michael joined Alex at the kitchen table. "Telekinesis, basically. I can move objects by exerting mental force on them."

"Okay, good. And the normal laws of physics apply? It would take more effort to lift this table," Alex thumped the wood, "than it would to lift one chair?"

"Yep. Mass, gravity, wind velocity, drag coefficients, so on and so forth. All applicable."

"All right. I'm guessing from the dishes that you don't need line of sight, is that correct? You just need to know where something is to be able to act on it?" Alex was building a picture in his head of what might be possible. Normally he'd take notes, too, but that didn't seem like a good idea. Inanimate glass fragments were one thing. Live people were another.

"That is correct." Michael held out the key fob to Alex, smirking. "For example, now that I've seen your front door in action, I could unlock it from here."

"There's a comforting thought." At least it wouldn't result in a log through the window, like Kyle had nearly done yesterday. And under different circumstances, Alex had to admit that he would rather like the notion that Michael had his own key. "Could you do it from your place, or do you have a maximum range?"

"I don't know." Michael tilted his head, thinking. "I can't remember trying it long distance. It usually is something in view, because there aren't a lot of repeats. My own door lock is the only thing I manipulate regularly."

Oh, really? Alex could think of all kinds of things Michael manipulated regularly, albeit not physically. Or psychically, whatever. But he wasn't going to say that. "We can probably assume that you do have a maximum range but if most of your activity is on what you can see, or what's near you that you know well, then that's where we focus."

"Sounds good," Michael nodded. "I guess the next question is, how do we focus on that?" It was strange to be having such a normal conversation about it. This time, Alex's steadiness reassured Michael. It was all so matter-of-fact that it was hard to feel nervous.
"Almost. The next question is, how do you account for conservation of energy? There must be a cost associated with using the power, right?"

"Right." Michael drew the slim plastic bottle from the back waistband of his jeans and placed it on the table. "That's where this comes in."

Alex regarded the bottle with raised eyebrows. It couldn't be what it looked like, could it? He unscrewed the cap and sniffed the contents, wrinkling his nose at the strong scent. "Nail polish remover? Really?" Examining the label more closely, he observed, "It isn't acetone free. Not Maria's type, then."

Michael chuckled. "The acetone is the important part, actually. It's sort of a tonic for us. Counteracts the effects of using our powers." He'd thought for a second that Alex might try to taste it, given his curiosity, and Michael's stomach was still settling from the unexpected lurch of fear.

"Acetone, huh? Didn't see that coming." Alex sniffed the bottle again, coughing as he inhaled too deeply, and laughed at himself for it. Drinking a substance poisonous to humans seemed a lot more alien than telekinesis. Possibly that was just Alex, though. He'd been friends with Maria for so long that the proven existence of something that could be described as a psychic power didn't surprise him. He shrugged, smiling while he handed over the remover. "But then, what do I know about alien physiology?"

He shouldn't. Michael knew he shouldn't. Here they were, managing a decent adult conversation about something important. But with Alex laughing, he couldn't resist, and a slow, sexy smile curved Michael's lips. "Oh, I don't know. I might have said you were intimately familiar with some alien physiology."

The sudden heat emanating from Michael caught Alex off guard and wrapped him in warmth. The instant slide show in his head only added to the effect, stirring sense memories of Michael's skin under his hands, the taste of that smirk. They were strong enough that Alex had to ask, "Guerin, you aren't...?"

Michael's smile widened. He knew exactly what Alex was asking, and he shook his head, keeping his eyes locked on Alex's. "I'm just looking at you, Private."

"Uh-huh." Alex believed him, but almost wished Michael had been caressing him with his mind. He could brush aside his own reaction then. But it was all in his head. And his heart, he knew.

"Alien's honour." Michael made the Boy Scouts sign with his hand. He could practically see a heat shimmer over the table between them and he both blessed and cursed that table. If Alex had been in easy reach, Michael would be kissing him now, and he knew how that would end: with him being kicked out of the cabin.

"Funny." Alex felt flushed and he shifted in the chair, breaking the eye contact with some difficulty. Flirting like this would get them nowhere. He'd handled it badly at the drive-in, let his father get into his head, but Alex did have reservations about some of Michael's behaviour. He did hold himself to a high standard. He wanted a partner who did the same. And he just wasn't sure if Michael could be that person.

Alex took a swig of water and twisted the bottle in his hands, not looking at Michael. "Um, so, what happens if you don't have acetone after?"

And there was the bucket of cold water. Michael sighed. What the hell, the mood had already been ruined. "Projectile vomit."
"That sounds like fun." Small wonder that Michael carried around a bottle. Isobel probably kept some in her handbag. Max, well, Max was probably screwed if he needed it on the job. A gun belt didn't really leave him many options. Alex would have a tough time concealing it in his uniform, too.

"Yeah, barrel of laughs."

"Just puke, or is it more like flu? You know, sweating, shakes, chills and hot flashes both?" Alex had escaped the experience for many years now, but he vividly remembered the one time he'd been deathly ill as a kid.

"Never had the flu. Never been sick," Michael shrugged. Those symptoms seemed to track with what Isobel had been like after mindwarping Maria, but he intended to stick to only his personal experiences.

"Oh, you suck, dude. I'm jealous!" Alex had to laugh.

"It's a gift," Michael informed him smugly.

"True, that." This felt like even footing again, and Alex was going to start outlining his plan when his stomach growled. He checked the time. "Shit, I need to eat. You want a sandwich?"

"Sure." Michael watched as Alex put plates, knives, and a loaf of bread on the table, then grabbed what looked like a condiment caddy from the fridge, with jars of mustard and mayo and everything else they'd need. It was genius. "That's awesome."

Alex smiled, putting two slices of bread on his plate and picking up his knife. "That, is DIY lunch, Guerin. Knock yourself out."

[end chapter six]
Joining the Circus

Chapter Notes

Even if it hurts
Even if it makes me bleed
I'm gonna carry you
Pushing through
With the dirt on my sleeves

Even if it hurts
Even if it's razor deep
I'm not giving up
Not gonna run
I'll be there when you need me
Even if it Hurts

~"Even If It Hurts", Sam Tinnesz

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * * * *

Michael now knew why they'd stopped at the sports store: tennis balls.

A loose circle of tennis balls surrounded Michael in the grass, somewhere on Alex's property, far enough back that he could see neither cabin nor road. Just endless fucking green. With neon yellow dots. And Alex, seated nearby on a lawn chair.

"Okay, I'm all set up. Now what?"

Alex waved at the circle. "Move something. Juggle, whatever. Just leave me an opening so I can come over there once you've got going." He'd had Michael carry everything and had watched him place the tennis balls, conserving his energy for the steps after these. Not to mention, psyching himself up.

"Here goes, then." The basic idea was pretty brilliant to Michael's way of thinking. Tennis balls were lightweight but had a sturdy shape, easy for him to manipulate, and they were unlikely to kill anyone if they were flung hard or exploded.

Michael concentrated, levitating three balls in front of him and three behind, leaving both sides open as requested. The juggling action began slowly, first one set whirling in the classic shape, and then the other set in counterpoint. He wasn't a flashy guy but he did have an urge to do the magician arms, just for shits and giggles. He didn't, though. Michael was doing his best to be serious here.

"Show-off." Alex couldn't deny that it was impressive. Or the little glow from knowing that Michael was showing off for him. Sad, Manes. You are sad.
"Hey, man, you said to juggle. I'm just doing what I'm told."

"There's a first time for everything."

Michael laughed. It faded into a nervous smile as Alex made his way over to stand in front of Michael. He knew what was coming next, sort of, and he didn't have the vaguest idea how it would affect him.

"How're you feeling? Your control looks solid enough." The figure eights were well-defined and even to Alex's eyes.

"Um, steady, I guess?" Describing his feelings wasn't exactly Michael's forte but he wasn't going to learn to control his powers when he was angry if he didn't know when he was angry.

"Good." Alex paused to silently question his own sanity. Then he drove his fist into Michael's stomach.

Michael doubled over with an expulsion of breath. He gulped in air and yelled, "What the fuck, Alex?!"

"Shortcut for guys like us, Guerin," Alex kept his voice flat, not letting his relief show. Okay. He wasn't dead, so maybe it wasn't a completely insane plan after all. He looked down at Michael. "You dropped a ball."

"Fuck you," Michael muttered, straightening up. He could feel his control skittering and he glared at Alex. He was back to having the other man's calm manner really piss him off. Michael coughed and focused on adding the dropped ball back into circulation, smoothing the movement of both sets. "Fuck you twice for being right."

Alex couldn't hold back the laugh. "Well, you know, when you're good, you're good."

"You're not good. You're an asshole," Michael grumbled.

"Such a well developed vocabulary, Guerin. I thought you were supposed to be smart," Alex needled. Not the greatest comeback but the important thing was to keep the momentum going.

Michael grunted in response. He glanced to the side and picked up a third set of tennis balls, starting them in another rotation. When it was established, he looked straight at Alex, smirking.

Alex genuinely was impressed. But he kept that to himself, simply raising an eyebrow. If he'd had two hands free, he would have added a slow clap, but a dismissive expression would have to do. "Huh."

"Huh?" Michael took exception to the tone, letting it get under his skin where he would usually brush it off. The whole point here, for both of them, was to get Michael angry. It already wasn't fun and he knew it wasn't going to get any better.

"Yeah. Huh." Alex shrugged. "I guess I expected better of you."

Dangerous territory, because Michael knew it was true. That Alex would say it, use it against him this way, started a slow burn in his chest. The comment had had nothing to do with juggling tennis balls with his brain.

Alex noted the muscles jumping in Michael's jaw and knew that had hit home. He pushed. "What's the matter? Pussy got your tongue?"
"Excuse you?" Those words did not just come out of Alex Manes's mouth.

"Well, women and whiskey, that's what you do with your life nowadays, isn't it?" Alex phrased it as a question but his tone conveyed it as fact. And it was, sort of, but in the hours since he'd learned of Michael's origins, there'd been some shifts beginning in his thinking, as he started to get to grips with the enormity of what that meant for Michael.

Michael struck back immediately. "Gotta get my kicks somewhere, right? Since you're off getting it in the ass from half the base." He saw the flash of hurt surprise in Alex's eyes, there and gone in a blink, not realising he'd been displaying the same thing this whole time.

It wasn't true - was so far from the truth as to be laughable - but Alex could use it. He didn't think Michael had noticed how erratic the movement of the tennis balls had become, as he got more and more worked up. They were nearly to the target and Alex thought one more push might do it.

He tilted his head, giving Michael a sly smile. "And so what if I were?"

*Pop!* A ball exploded behind Alex, and then another. The remaining ones whizzed round at dizzying speed.

Michael's chest heaved with furious breath. He tried to bring the tennis balls back down to the grass but he couldn't focus and they kept on spinning.

Now Alex dropped his crutch, ignoring everything but Michael. He stepped close. "I'm here, Guerin. Look at me." He put a hand on Michael's chest, feeling the effort it was taking him, and continued to speak gently. "Breathe with me."

Michael had expected it to be harder to switch gears, move away from the anger, but the soft warmth in Alex's voice, the earnest care in his gaze, made it possible for Michael to begin to calm down. It took longer this time, or at least he thought it did, because he also kept the remaining balls in the air, exactly as intended. Gradually they returned to the clean figure eights, right along with Michael returning to deep, even breaths.

"You did it," Alex praised quietly. He couldn't help the wide grin. "Well done."

Michael sighed. "I hate you." It was totally void of conviction.

"No, you don't."

"No I don't," he agreed. "But goddamn did I want to belt you."

Alex laughed. "Well, that was the effect I was trying for, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." Michael was keenly aware of the hand still pressed to his chest. He wanted to take it and kiss the back of it, like an old-fashioned courting gesture, and then kiss the daylights out of Alex. He wanted... Fuck. Everything. He wanted... Everything.

Reaction was starting to set in for Alex. He'd been calm, collected, carrying out his plan. Now, having accomplished the mission, he felt shaky. "Um," he didn't know quite what to say. He finally said, "I kind of need a hug. I know it's awkward, but... Would you mind?"

It wasn't what Michael had expected to hear but it was a welcome request. He closed the small distance between them and wrapped his arms around Alex, holding him tight.

"Thanks," Alex whispered, and shut his eyes, finding solace in Michael's embrace.
Chapter End Notes

I might miss posting tomorrow (Wed), because that's when I can watch the new ep and it may kill me!!! But I'll definitely try.
~Tas

P.S. No spoilers, pretty please. :-}
Yeahhh I did need a little S01E06 recovery time. But here we are, back on the horse!
~Tas

* * * * *

Obviously the best course of action after the turbulent events of the day had been to crack open the beer and lounge around in Alex's living room after dinner.

"I can't believe there's actually someone else in this county who doesn't own a TV," Michael laughed.

"Do you get shit for it, like, constantly?" Alex wanted to know. "Because I am raked over the coals all the damn time."

"Yes! Max isn't so bad, I can just tell him I've got books, but anyone else, you'd think I'd have grown an extra head."

"I read a lot, but mostly on my phone these days. Way easier to carry around and use one-handed. And then I've got music, too," Alex nodded. "I get surprisingly good reception out here. But I'm not that far from the highway, just nowhere near town."

"Yeah, you do," Michael agreed. He'd had no technical issues getting hold of Max and Isobel earlier. People issues, in that both of them were miserable and neither wanted to talk to him, but Michael couldn't blame that on the cell service.

No, that was squarely on the continued fallout from Rosa's death. How exactly said fallout was falling, Michael didn't know. Because nobody would tell him.

And he wasn't going to worry about it tonight. He was going to enjoy this time with Alex, bittersweet though it might be, knowing that everything would be different tomorrow. They'd go back to their respective corners and maybe even farther apart as the past decade unravelled around Max, Michael, and Isobel.

When Alex would start to discover that Michael really was a criminal, and not just for the meaningless petty theft of some copper wire. For actual felonies.

"So," Michael began, trying to keep it lighthearted. "Read anything good lately?"

Alex noticed the shift in Michael's mood but chalked it up to aftereffects of their little experiment earlier. He was happy enough to talk literature and avoid the dozen or so elephants in the room.

At length, though, Alex realised how tired he was. He sighed. "I gotta go to bed. Do you want an extra blanket or will that be enough?" He pointed at the throw over the back of the couch where Michael sat.

"What? I don't need a blanket, I'm not ---"
"Dude. You are not driving." Alex gave him a stern look. "Please don't tell me I have to actually take your keys."

Michael sighed. "Fine. I will sleep on the couch."

"Good." Alex got to his feet and stood still for a couple of minutes, waiting for his body to feel stable enough to walk. He should have called it a night a while ago.

"Alex, man, you okay?" Michael's brow furrowed. Alex hadn't seemed that badly off, closer to tipsy than wasted.

"Yeah, yeah. I just didn't account for, you know, learning aliens exist and trying stuff with your powers in the day's energy plans."

"You lost me," Michael admitted. "Energy plans? Is that something DeLuca has you doing?"

Alex chuckled. "No. I can see why you'd think that, but no. It's... I, uh, I kind of need to evaluate where I am, physically, every morning, and adjust my plans for that day based on how I feel, and what I need and want to get done." He shrugged, rubbing at his lip. "Today had some curve balls."

"I think you mean tennis balls," Michael quipped, and they both laughed.

"Touché."

"Can I do anything?" Michael didn't want to make Alex feel self-conscious or pitied or whatever, but he also didn't want him to fall on his face. Plus that extra energy expenditure had been to help Michael so it only seemed fair.

"Thanks. I should have brought the other crutch out so I could use them both. But I didn't, so." He'd have asked Michael to retrieve it but it felt weird, the idea of Michael in his bedroom without him. "Could you, walk me to my room?" Because that would be so much better. Good job, Manes.

"Yeah, sure." Michael went to stand by the door. He wasn't reading anything into the request; Alex was clearly exhausted. Instead of the alcohol hitting when he'd stood up, it had been the fatigue.

"Thanks." Michael went to stand by the door. He wasn't reading anything into the request; Alex was clearly exhausted. Instead of the alcohol hitting when he'd stood up, it had been the fatigue.

"Thanks." He moved slowly, testing each step before he committed his full weight to it. That had become reflex but when Alex was this tired, he needed to actively think about how to walk.

Michael watched him, silent. He could see the amount of effort Alex was having to put in to do something Michael did automatically, and any resistance to staying dissipated. It was his fault Alex was overtired and that made it his responsibility to ensure the other man was okay.

By the time he'd crossed the short distance and gotten up the couple of stairs, Alex just stared at the door to the separate bedroom like he'd never seen it before. Key, he needed the key to open it. Where'd he put the fob after Michael had returned it?

Clocking the pause, Michael squinted past Alex at the doorknob. Looked the same as the front door. He extended a tendril of power, finding the right place to exert pressure on the locking mechanism. The click was barely audible and then he swung the door open, ready for Alex to step through.

"And you don't get sick? You suck," Alex complained.

"Sorry," not sounding it at all.

Alex made a skeptical noise. "Uh-huh." He let out a long sigh once he was safely sat on the bed,
covers folded down so he could just slide in. As soon as he got his jeans and the prosthesis off.

Michael hovered in the doorway. He wanted to help, but he also felt he needed to keep some distance - they both needed him to do that. He did notice how unconcerned Alex seemed about undressing with an audience and it made Michael smile.

Stripped down to boxers and T-shirt and reclining against the pile of pillows, Alex pulled the bedding up and over himself, grateful for its warmth. The way Michael was looking at him made his stomach flutter. Still. He began, "Guerin," subsiding when Michael held up a hand.

"I'm just 'Crutch Number Two' right now, man. I'll have my phone on if you need anything overnight," he nodded at Alex's cell phone, laid on the night table beside him.

"Thank you," it was heartfelt. "There's food in the fridge and coffee in the cupboard, if you're up first and you want anything. Help yourself."

"I will, thanks." Michael hesitated, but it wasn't the time to start a conversation or say anything important. "Sleep well."

"Oh, Guerin, there is one more thing." Alex pulled a pillow out of the pile behind him and threw it at Michael.

Who got it in the face as he turned back around. It bounced and Michael snorted a laugh, bending to pick it up. "Thanks?"

Alex laughed. "Sorry. I've been meaning to replace the ones on the couch because I think they're the same ones as when I was a kid, but I never think of it except when I'm trying to sleep there."

"In that case, yes, thanks," Michael grinned. "See ya in the morning."

Alex watched him go, smiling when he heard the lock click. He'd been wrong earlier: even in the current circumstances, Alex liked that Michael had his own key to the cabin. It made him feel safe, something he didn't feel easily or often these days.

He shoved the pillows around under the covers until he'd achieved something approaching a comfortable sleeping position, using them to support his unbalanced body. As soon as he relaxed, Alex was asleep.

Michael wasn't so lucky. He built up then banked the fire, stretching out with the pillow Alex had thrown him and the blanket, lying there trying to not think too much, feel too much. Trying his damnedest not to want too much, when he knew it was going to be taken away.

The fabric of the pillowcase smelled like Alex and it lent a sense of intimacy that sleeping on the couch didn't usually entail. Michael typically slept flat on his back but now he curled up on his side so he could breathe in Alex's scent, in lieu of the man himself. It was a long time before his heart let him sleep.

[end chapter eight]
The sound of the doorknob jiggling and the scrape of the key woke Michael. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he reached out with his mind and unlocked the door before the key got to it. Anticipating Alex's reaction, given how positive he'd been about it yesterday.

"I could have sworn that was locked. Huh. I guess he's up!"

_Oh shit._ Michael knew that voice. He'd heard it often enough. In fact, Isobel was the only woman he heard speaking more often than he heard Maria. He just hadn't expected to see anyone else here.

Michael sat up, swinging his legs to plant his feet on the floor as Maria entered the cabin. "Morning, DeLuca."

"Guerin?" The level of shock in her voice made him chuckle. "What are you doing here?"

"I was sleeping," he drawled.

"Obviously. Why were you sleeping on Alex's couch?"

He gestured at the empty beer bottles littering the coffee table, smirking at her. "Driving home didn't seem like a good idea."

"Who knew you were capable of being sensible?" Maria scoffed. She looked at his sock-clad feet. "Get your boots on, cowboy. You're going to make yourself useful."

"Doing...?" He asked the question but he did move, assuming that whatever she wanted him to do was outside. And being useful sounded good.

"The heavy lifting. My trunk is open, just bring it all into the kitchen."

That surprised Michael but he could play burro, no problem. Boots on, he went into the morning sunshine, squinting against the brightness. It was early yet, nighttime chill still present in the air. It would warm up soon enough under that clear sky.

Maria's SUV was parked in front, the rear open towards the cabin. No wonder she hadn't known he was here. His truck was round the back. But Michael hadn't been trying to bring anything beyond himself inside yesterday.

He surveyed the contents of the vehicle. All beverages. Two cases of beer and five of bottled water. Michael couldn't help the laughter bubbling out. Looked like having a bartender for a best friend was serving Alex well.

Michael was still grinning when he deposited the first two cases of water in the designated spot in the kitchen.

"Something amusing you, Guerin?"

"I didn't know bartenders made house calls."

"They don't. Bar owners might, for special occasions." Her eyes sparkled with mirth, belying the prim tone.
"Ah, I see. So Alex is a special occasion?"

"Of course!" She checked behind Michael, presumably to ensure Alex hadn't shown up, and added, "It's something he'll let me do. The nearest Costco is, like, Albuquerque, and the grocery stores in town don't carry stuff by the case much. But, well water, you know, so I keep him stocked up at cost."

"Yeah, no, it's a great idea. It's good." He wanted to thank her, but it really wasn't his place - Michael had no claims on Alex. He shuffled his feet and sighed. "I'll get the next load."

"Guerin," she called after him before he left the cabin. "You want coffee?"

"Yes, please," he called back as he exited. Michael eyed the three remaining cases of water. He could carry it all, but he probably shouldn't. A couple extra trips was the smarter option.

So he made them, back and forth between vehicle and kitchen, until Maria's trunk was empty and Michael closed the lid on it.

"Cream, sugar?" Maria enquired when Michael sat at the table.

He shook his head. "Nope, black, please."

She poured the fresh brew into a mug and passed it to him, taking a second for herself. Then she sat across from Michael and looked him up and down.

"What?" he demanded.

"You are so much nicer in the morning."

He laughed and winked at her. "I gave you plenty of opportunity to discover that before now, DeLuca."

Maria rolled her eyes. "You are also incorrigible."

"I know. It's part of my charm."

"Is that what you call it?" she snorted a laugh.

"Yep." Bantering with Maria DeLuca felt familiar and comfortable, despite their current location, and Michael relaxed, sipping at the coffee in between trading barbs.

* * * * *

Alex had heard the SUV drive up, the sound of the engine penetrating the fog in his brain. He'd slept like the dead. Everything ached, but the same way it always did when he woke up, nothing unusual. Thank God.

He'd forgotten Maria was coming over but he wasn't concerned. She already knew Michael and Alex figured he could trust them to not kill each other for the amount of time it would take him to shower.

The warm water splashing over his bare skin felt good and Alex closed his eyes, enjoying it. The shower room had been his one major change to the cabin when he'd moved in; the little cubicle it had previously had wouldn't have allowed him independence. But with the renovation to adapt the space, he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself.
Considering what the day might bring formed his usual shower thoughts, doing his physical checks while he washed, using the grab bars to lift onto his one foot to rinse off thoroughly before returning to the stool.

Today, though, Alex couldn't stop thinking about Michael in his bedroom last night, laughing. He'd conjured the mental image many times before, at first in a kind of visualisation exercise after they’d reconnected that afternoon at Foster Homestead Ranch. Hoping to gather the courage to invite Michael home.

Since the drive-in, the image had been wistful, an homage to lost chances and what ifs.

But now Alex had a real memory. And yeah, Michael had been across the room at the time, but it had felt good to have him there, in Alex's private space.

Another memory floated to the surface. Not of Michael; this one was from hanging out with friends, in a different desert on another continent. A long discussion that got more and more ridiculous over the night, kicked off by Stevie's proclamation that any serious conversation with someone you wanted to fuck should be prefaced by getting your own rocks off. That way, you could focus on their words instead of picturing them naked.

His friends did have a way with words sometimes.

The stool was close enough to the wall to let Alex lean back, warm skin meeting ceramic tile. The abrupt chill caused a full body shiver but it faded fast as he wrapped his fingers around his cock, beginning to stroke.

He let his mind wander wherever it wanted to go. Whatever made his breath catch and his balls tingle. A lot of what surfaced weren't things he'd actually want to do in real life, but something about it turned him on, and he'd stopped trying to analyse or control his sex thoughts. They were private.

And vivid this morning. Alex could practically hear Michael, the sense memory of his noises strong in Alex’s brain. Remembering the feel of work-roughened hands on him, in him, all over him.

He groaned, tensing as his body pulsed in release. Alex coaxed as much pleasure from himself as he could, lifting his hand away when he started to get over sensitive.

Masturbation, meditation, and whatever else it was going to take for Alex to stay on an even emotional keel today. *Bring it on.*
Breakfast of Champions

* * * *

Alex came into the kitchen to find Maria at the stove cooking a big batch of scrambled eggs, and Michael laughing as he set the table with three places. His eyebrows went right up.

"I guess I didn't need to worry about you two getting along. Or making yourselves at home," Alex tilted his head at Maria. This was not standard behaviour for her.

"Alex!" She put the spatula down long enough to grab him. Alex hugged her back, grinning.

"Please tell me there's coffee."

"Oh, she did that first, man. While I was still lugging in your personal bar supplies," Michael teased. He couldn't help looking Alex over, noticing the damp spiky hair and the hint of colour in his face.

"Oh, so I have to thank you for that?" Alex shot back, pouring himself a mug and carrying it to the table. He chose the seat opposite Michael, beside the empty spot for Maria. Safer by far.

"You do," Maria confirmed. "He even collected the empties and loaded them into my car."

"Well. Thank you," Alex smiled at Michael. It was more than a little surreal, having him here, especially with Maria too. He looked good. Of course, he looked exactly the same as last night, seeing as he'd slept in his clothes, but Alex's opinion hadn't changed, either.

"Here you go, boys." Maria divided the pan's contents among the plates and plopped down into her chair.

"And thank you, too," Alex bumped her shoulder with his then picked up his fork. "I can't remember the last time someone made me breakfast."

He caught the way Michael's smile dimmed and mentally kicked himself, grateful his own mouth was full now so he couldn't say anything else.

"You need to get out more," Maria told him, and Alex just nodded.

Michael felt a little like he'd been slapped, and at the same time, he was relieved. If Alex wasn't spending the night with him, at least Michael knew he wasn't spending it with anyone else, either.

"Yeah, thanks from me, too," he told Maria, avoiding looking at Alex. It was easy to do as he applied himself to the food.

Alex followed suit, relieved when Maria fell silent as well. It wasn't quite companionable, but hunger made for a decent reason not to talk, and by the time he scraped the plate clean, Alex was on even footing again.

Predictably, Maria spoke first. "I hate to eat and run but I gotta get back. Guerin, I can give you a lift to the junkyard, if you're done with the generator repair?"

Michael smiled at her. "Thanks, but I've got my truck. I mean, that's where the tools live, you know?" He carefully didn't look at Alex, who would know the generator repair story was an outright lie.
"Oh, yeah, I always forget there's enough room back there for two vehicles," she talked as she filled the sink with soapy water and put the used dishes in there, collecting Alex's fork directly from his fingers before he had a chance to put it down.

"Hey!" Alex had to laugh. "How can you be sure I'm done with that?"

"Eggs are gone," she shrugged. Then wiped her hands dry and picked up her handbag. "A'right, it's y'all's turn to do some work. Alex, text me when your next weekend is so we can make plans."

"Will do," he nodded. He would ask Michael about this phantom repair once they were alone.

"Guerin, I'm sure I'll see you soon, especially since you have a two drink credit."

"I have a what now?" Last Michael had heard, he owed her $84. How'd he end up in the black?

"A two drink credit. I was going to keep the extra as a tip, but I'm feeling goodwill towards you today."

Michael must have looked as confused as he felt because she laughed. "Isobel. Remember? She paid your tab when she paid for the reading."

"Oh, uh, she didn't say anything. Probably forgot. Like you said, she'd had enough when I took her home." He'd completely missed her paying Maria.

Maria nodded, more serious now. "I hope she's okay. I heard she had a fight with her husband." She hesitated, then added, "You should know that people think it's because of you."

Michael sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fucking small towns, man. Of course they think she's slumming it."

"Just to be clear, you're not sleeping with her, right?"

"What?" Michael scowled in pure disgust. "She's my goddamned sister! Gross."

"She's your sister?" Maria gasped.

"Yes!" He hadn't said it aloud for years. Hadn't been able to feel that connection to Isobel, not the same way as he had when they were kids. Or to Max. Especially not to Max. Too much guilt and fury in the way. Too many secrets.

"I had no idea," Maria breathed.

"Most people don't. The Evanses wanted an adopted daughter, and she clung to Max, so they stretched to a two-fer. But they weren't interested in taking three." He shrugged, pretending it didn't matter. Wishing that were true. "Shit happens."

"Oh, Michael," her tone was sympathetic. "I'm sorry. Do you... Like, do you want people to know?"

He sighed, shaking his head. "Noah knows about it, so he'll know what people are saying about me and Izzy is total bullshit. And if you quash this rumour, he might get hurt by its replacement. So just leave it alone." Michael offered a supremely cynical smile. "It's not like it will damage my reputation any."

"True," Maria agreed, but still in that gentle tone. She patted his shoulder. "I'll see you at the Pony."

With that, she left, and Michael put his head in his hands, elbows resting on the table. He didn't want
to look at Alex. He'd never told him about the Evanses. Although, they hadn't actually named many of the horrors each had suffered growing up. They had recognised each other's pain at a level beyond words.

He heard Alex stand, and then soft clinking and splashing. He realised Alex was doing the dishes. Michael felt he should be doing that, but he didn't move, keeping his head down like a coward.

Alex washed plates, cutlery, mugs, frying pan, all on automatic while his thoughts whirled. When everything was stacked neatly in the drying rack, he pulled out two more mugs and split the remaining coffee between them, then started a fresh pot. He had a feeling they might be here a while.

Michael took the mug placed in front of him, cupping its heat in his palms. He nodded in Alex's general direction but he didn't raise his eyes and he didn't speak.

"Guerin, do you," no, too confrontational. Alex didn't want Michael to feel under attack. He wanted answers, but not by adding to the defeated slump of Michael's shoulders. He tried again, "Are you ever able to tell the plain truth? Without risking exposure?"

The question surprised Michael. He considered it for several minutes, really thinking about it. It felt like the answer mattered.

Finally he admitted, "I don't know. I think it flavours everything, even when it has nothing to do with it on the surface, you know? Like, it's a permanent filter over my brain."

"Not unlike being gay," Alex said softly. It made sense to him. Then again, Michael had always made sense to him, on a deep, almost spiritual level. It was why they'd connected in the first place.

"Yeah, I guess it would be." Michael flicked a glance at Alex. "I haven't had to live with that filter." He passed for straight easily. People would have to actually pay attention to notice him noticing all genders, and no one did.

"And I'm no alien. But I think the similarities are there, and I can better understand where you're coming from."

"Can you?" Michael's gaze snapped up, anger swelling. "Can you really? You can understand how I became a felon at age 13, covering up a murder because Max had just come into his powers and Isobel was in danger? You can understand how Isobel was so damaged by what happened then that a switch flipped in her towards the end of senior year and when she committed murder, I covered that up, too? Told her it was me when she couldn't remember anything? Gave up every dream I'd ever had to take care of her and make sure it never happened again?" The air around him crackled with energy, the curtains trembling in an artificial breeze. "Can you understand all that, Alex?"

Pain saturated Michael's voice as he finished quietly, "And if you can, could you fucking explain it to me?"

Stunned, Alex just stared at him. Neither the outburst nor its contents were expected, and he didn't know how he felt, never mind what he thought of these revelations. But the flutter of the curtains caught his eye, and Alex had long practice in shoving everything personal aside to get on with the mission.

He grabbed Michael's chin, forcing him to face him. "Guerin. Breathe."

The sudden touch clarified the command and Michael became aware of the power leak. His brow furrowed. "Shit." He concentrated on expanding his diaphragm, pulling deep breaths that barely moved his chest as the air was drawn down into his body. The imaginary scent of ozone faded away.
into the reality of kitchen smells.

"Good." Alex let go of him once the room had calmed.

Michael sighed. "Maybe you could explain you while you're at it."

"In what sense?"

"In, like," Michael waved a hand, as if that would magically convey his meaning to Alex. "You not losing your cool, like at all. You don't even flinch when I'm levitating stuff around you."

Alex looked sideways and closed his eyes briefly. Better than rolling them at that comment. "Did you miss the part where I spent the bulk of the last ten years in one war zone or another? You think a few dishes or tennis balls are in the same league, really?" He shook his head. "Guerin, you don't scare me."

Michael huffed a laugh. "Yeah, I guess I'm small potatoes in comparison."

"Little bit," Alex agreed, raising his eyebrows. "I also spent considerable time in a convalescent hospital for wounded warriors, where me and every other patient had to learn to deal with our anger. I've had a lot of therapy, physio and psych both." He rubbed his bottom lip and sucked it into his mouth. "I have tools, Guerin. Techniques to cope with life. And I had help acquiring them. You haven't."

"A toolbox for the mind, huh?" It appealed to Michael, framing his problems that way. "Does Stanley make one?"

Now Alex rolled his eyes. "It's kind of a DIY job."

"You do like your DIY."

"I do, yeah." Alex prized his independence, had done so long before he'd lost a limb.

"So you aren't scared of me." Michael could accept that, with the context he'd been given. He stared into the coffee mug, unable to look at Alex as he asked, "Do you hate me?" Alex had been so decisively negative about him selling copper wire. His 'side hustle'. What must he be thinking of Michael now?

Alex's throat closed at the lost note in Michael's voice. He couldn't offer complete or immediate assurance on how he felt overall; Alex was still figuring that out himself. But he knew how he didn't feel. "No. I don't hate you. And I'm still going to help."

"Why?" Michael whispered, swallowing hard against the pressure of tears.

"Because you need it, all three of you, and because I made a promise to a dead man." If this went horribly sideways, Jim Valenti would have a lot to answer for.

Michael nodded, remembering what a young, rebellious Alex had told him once about not everyone having an agenda, that people could be nice just because. That boy had had a generosity of spirit that didn't seem to have been diminished any by the years or the life events he'd experienced.

It was one of the things Michael loved most about him.

He cleared his throat, finally looking at Alex. "Okay, then. What do you need from me?"

Alex breathed a silent sigh of relief. "I need to know everything. Whatever you know. Start at the
beginning, and don't leave anything out."

[end chapter ten]
Late afternoon sun shone golden, tinting the air in the living room. It seemed to follow Michael, Alex thought, amused at the whimsical notion. His gaze traced the path of light along the curves of Michael's hair, each distinct curl gleaming. His fingers itched to follow the same path but he stayed in his chair, connected to Michael only by virtue of watching him, stretched long on the couch, facing away.

They'd agreed hours ago that it would be easier if they weren't looking at each other. Neither man was naturally given to this much talking and it had been a slog, especially in full daylight.

And minus any booze.

Alex was still processing the information dump. Twenty years of Michael's life, to the twenty-seven of his own. The differences between them could be encapsulated by those seven years.

Yesterday, Alex's world had turned inside out. Today, upside down.

What the hell was tomorrow going to bring?

"The only disadvantage to living out here is, no pizza delivery," Alex broke the silence.

Michael twisted to look at him. "Seriously, dude? That's your takeaway?"

Alex shrugged. "I'm hungry."

"You're..." Michael started to laugh. He slid flat on the couch again and dissolved into giggles.

Why it was so funny, Michael had no idea. But the laughter washed through him until he was gasping for air, sides aching, tears running from the outer corners of his eyes.

Eyebrows raised, Alex had to grin, seeing Michael shake. He couldn't hear any hysteria, just pure mirth.

"Ohhh," Michael groaned, sitting up as the giggles died away at last. "My stomach hurts now."

"And everywhere else?" Alex asked with a gentle smile.

Michael propped his forearms on his thighs and looked at the floor. "I think, 'lighter' might be the best way to put it. Some of that, I mean, I've never said it out loud before." He raised his head. "There wasn't anyone it was safe to tell."

"Yeah. I get that." And Alex did. He'd chosen to flaunt his sexuality in high school when he couldn't hide it, but if he'd been able to pass for straight, he knew he probably would have kept it to himself, particularly with the situation at home.

"What about you?"

"It's kind of like standing in the middle of a renovation. You know where you started, and you think you know where you're going to finish, but getting there requires redrawing some plans. And re-evaluating your priorities as to what really matters, because it isn't always what you thought it would be," Alex spoke slowly, feeling his way through the metaphor. "So I'm in the messy part, trying to
figure out the priorities." He tilted his head. "Does that make sense?"

"It does." Fixing a car often had a similar trajectory. Michael's lips twitched. "But I can't believe you brought it back to DIY."

Alex rolled his eyes. "I didn't DIY the bathroom. I hired professional tradespeople."

"But the principle is the same, making adjustments to the plan as you go."

"Well, yeah," Alex conceded. "As long as we both understood what I meant in this context, though, that's what's important. And I think we do."

"Yeah." Michael felt antsy and drained at the same time, and more clear-headed than he'd been in years. "You got anything suitable for grilling? I can't cook worth a damn but I'm alright with a barbecue, and I saw you have one out back?"

"Um, whatever's in the fridge drawers should work. I refilled the tank last week so it should have plenty of fuel."

"Cool." It was all Michael said before heading to the kitchen, leaving Alex to sit alone in the sunglow, pensive now.

It wasn't okay, what Michael and his siblings had done. Alex knew the Ortechos had suffered so much more than the loss of Rosa. And the privileges afforded the aliens as Caucasians in New Mexico had made it easy to maintain the cover-up, because no one had bothered to look beyond the obvious scenario that had been presented to them.

Those same privileges had also meant that they hadn't anticipated how bad the town's reaction would actually be. It simply wouldn't have occurred to them.

And, those privileges blinded everyone else to what lay underneath. Caucasian, yes, but not human.

Statistics varied but the estimated amount of non-heterosexuals was something like ten percent of the global population, the last time Alex had checked. It was easy to feel alone, given the distribution of that population, but the actual number of people in that ten percent was, objectively, a lot.

Not so with Michael, Max, and Isobel. The three of them were it, on a planet of over seven billion people. And what that meant was that every move they made in their lives had to be designed to maximise their chances of survival.

Every move. No matter what.

What they'd done had been horrific. The continuation of it, keeping it covered up for ten years, was almost worse. None of it was right, none of it was okay, and there would need to be some reckoning.

But Alex found he could understand it. He'd lived through enough himself, learned enough from Michael in the past two days, to see the decision tree options for the situation the aliens had found themselves in, and every possible outcome had sucked.

Knowing that, feeling the truth of it in his bones, meant Alex could move forward now. He could live with himself if he helped.

Perhaps more importantly, he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he didn't.

* * * * *
Standing over the barbecue, Michael tended the food, flipping the chicken breasts and sweet peppers without any utensils.

He'd needed to put some space between him and Alex. Michael felt like he'd taken 400 grit fine sandpaper to his emotions; everything felt huge, intense and raw. He'd shone some bright lights on some pretty fucking dark places.

Right now, the best thing Michael could do was let Alex be, to mull over all the garbage that had come out of Michael's mouth, and do his bit to feed him.

The air was cool in the shade. Fresh. Michael focused on the feel of the breeze against his face, blowing his hair around. He could tell he'd only recently cut it because it wasn't sticking him in the eyeballs.

The smells were making him hungry. He hadn't been; he'd wanted to get some breathing room, and take care of Alex. It was probably the last opportunity Michael would have. Alex had said he wanted to help, but after Michael's full disclosure, he was expecting Alex to change his mind.

He floated the cooked food onto the waiting plates and turned off the grill. Time to face the music.

[end chapter eleven]
"So."

"Yeah."

"Thanks for this. It's good. What's the sauce?" Alex ventured, dipping a piece of chicken in the small bowl.Interrupting the earlier flow of words had left them in this awkward space and he didn't know how to climb out of it yet.

"Tabasco and honey. I dialled down the heat ratio for yours," Michael offered a crooked smile. He wanted to ask if Alex had reached any conclusions, identified any of those priorities he'd mentioned, but he couldn't do it. Michael had already laid out so much today, felt open and raw still. He simply wasn't capable of posing the questions that he knew would lead to Alex shutting him out and turning away from him.

It was the dance they did. Alex would make some overture, Michael would go all in, and Alex would push him away as soon as he'd gotten whatever he wanted this time. And Michael would collect the shattered pieces and try to glue them back together.

He didn't know if he could do it again. Not after those few days of bliss had ended so abruptly at the drive-in. It felt different this time.

"I appreciate that," Alex smiled. "I'd prefer not to melt my face off." He could tell some of Michael's emotions from his body language, how he'd drawn in on himself physically despite the teasing tone, the outward casualness.

Alex took a deep breath, hoping he wasn't about to make the biggest mistake of his life. "I think the next step is to talk to Max. We need to be certain of exactly what Liz knows. Then I probably need to talk to Liz." And wouldn't that be fun? But Alex knew how to talk to Liz - how to engage the scientific part of her brain and guide her to think logically. She was such a passionate person that sometimes she could use a little help in divorcing her emotions from a situation, and it would never be more necessary than on the subject of her sister's death.

"Max?" The things coming out of Alex's mouth bore no resemblance to the pre-emptive dialogue in Michael's head.

"Yeah, you know, your brother?" Why did Michael look so confused?

"Uh, yeah, no, I got that. Yeah, good idea. Talking to Max. We should probably go over there. Not really a phone friendly topic."

"Guerin, you okay?"

"What? Fine, yeah. Just wasn't what I thought you were gonna say, is all. No big." Which Michael realised was an outright lie as soon as he said it, because it was actually a very big deal indeed. "I'll call him when we're done here. If he's not home, he'll be with Izzy, since he's off work right now. On account of getting fucking shot." His eyeballs seemed to roll of their own accord. But, he and Max did that to each other constantly anyway.

"I said I was going to help, didn't I?"
"You did. But," Michael sighed. He had to be honest. "I've learned not to get too attached to what you say you're going to do."

That stung, but Alex couldn't deny its accuracy. "Yeah. I'm, uh, I'm working on that. This is bigger than you and me, though. Like, life and death bigger."

"I guess it is, yeah," Michael nodded. "So we finish up here and head to Max's." It wasn't a question, but it wasn't quite a statement, either.

"We do," Alex confirmed. His hat would be well and truly thrown into the ring then.

* * * * *

Michael didn't bother knocking, just exerted the barest pressure on the familiar door lock and walked into Max's house.

"That you, Michael?" came from the general direction of the hallway.

"Obviously. Where you at?"

"Coming." The word barely preceded the man. Michael looked Max over as he approached, noting the sling cradling his left arm against his body and the pain lines on his face.

"You drinking enough? Because you look like shit," Michael told him bluntly.

"Hello to you, too," Max snorted. He started to say something else and Michael saw his gaze sharpen as he spotted Alex. "Um, hi, Alex. Sorry, I didn't know Michael was bringing company."

"And I didn't know he didn't tell you." Alex raised his eyebrows.

"Any particular reason you kept that quiet, Michael?" Max enquired.

There it was, the tiny disappointed pause before his name that Michael had always thought sounded like Max wanted to call him something rude but was too polite to actually say it. He grinned.

"Let me do the introductions. Deputy Sheriff Max Evans, one third of the only set of otherworldly triplets on this planet, meet Captain Alex Manes, the newest member of our Save the Aliens Club."

The shock and anger dawning in Max's expression were deeply satisfying. "What did you do, Michael?" he gritted out.

Alex could see this going south fast without intervention. "He told me. Everything."

"Define everything," Max demanded.

Alex tilted his head. He understood Max was angry but he didn't appreciate the tone. Nodding at the flickering lamp, he asked evenly, "Got more light bulbs if you spark that one out?"

He watched Max's jaw work and the flickering steadied. "I do," Max confirmed, sounding calmer. "Michael, I need to speak with you in the other room."

Michael shook his head. "No, you don't. Everything means everything, Max. What we are. What we know. The birthday camping trip. Rosa. Liz." He stepped close to Max, earnest gaze boring into his brother's. "No more secrets. Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of Alex."

"You finally decide to trust someone and it's Jesse Manes's son? What the hell, Michael?"
"Oh, like you decided to resurrect Rosa Ortecho's sister and tell her the edited version without any input from me or Isobel?" Michael's temper flared. "Fuck you, Max. I'm done living by your rules."

Alex couldn't see anything floating but he was starting to recognise the way the air felt when Michael's telekinesis was gearing up. He touched Michael's elbow, speaking low. "Breathe."

Michael threw him a sideways glare but he did drag air into his lungs and it helped, letting him tamp it down. He addressed Max, "Look. The last person Alex would say anything to is his father. You need to trust me on that one."

Michael could practically see Max thinking, possibly connecting the few dots that he had about Michael's past relationship with Alex. He didn't care. For Alex's sake, he hoped Max wouldn't actually ask about the personal aspects of it. As Alex had said earlier, back at the cabin, this was much bigger than one undefined fucked up whatever it was.

"Okay," Max finally capitulated, giving a lopsided shrug. "Okay. Let's all sit down and see what we can come up with."

[end chapter twelve]
"I don't think you're going to be able to get Liz here, Alex. She was very clear that she doesn't want to see me again. I don't see her coming back to my house."

Michael could sympathise with Max's dejected tone. This was going to suck for all of them. But if there were better ideas, neither he nor Max were coming up with them.

"Let me deal with that. Telling her I have information about Rosa's birth will force her to show up." Alex knew Liz and he knew what buttons to push. She'd be furious with him, but he was confident he could bring her around.

"All right." Max waved his free hand, palm up, acquiescing. "Then Kyle?"

Alex glanced between the two men. He had a feeling he knew what the answer would be, but he asked, "Before Isobel?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, we don't even know what he knows yet. Liz only told him about me, but it isn't exactly a big leap to pull in Isobel and Michael," Max explained.

Michael was about to agree, then it struck him why Alex had asked. "You think it should be Isobel. Why?"

"I do, yeah. In fact, if I didn't know that I need to get Liz on board before putting her in the same room as her sister's killer, I'd say to get Isobel here now." Alex could see neither of them understood.

"Okay, tell me why you disagree with Isobel next."

"Because we're trying to keep her safe!" Max not quite shouted.

Michael nodded at Max. "That. We protect Isobel. It's like the only thing we've always agreed on." When Alex said nothing, Michael sighed. "I can see from your face that's the wrong answer but fuck me sideways if I know why." When Alex gave him the 'really?' eyebrows, Michael just rolled his eyes. That wasn't how he'd meant it but hey, if Alex wanted to take it there....

The mental image was far from unpleasant but Alex didn't need the distraction. "Look. You both believe you need to protect her at all costs, even from herself, and you've acted on that belief a number of times over the years. And where has that gotten you?"

Michael and Max looked at each other. Michael could see he didn't get it, either. "Uh, here, I guess. Being lectured in Max's living room."

"I'm not lecturing you, Guerin. I'm asking you to think. Or has that much vaunted brain of yours atrophied beyond repair?" Alex did not have infinite patience.

Scowling, Michael bit back a retort. He didn't want to say something he couldn't come back from. Flicking a sharp look at Alex, he shrugged, sullen. "We protected her from the drifter first, I guess. That was definitely the right thing to do. Ended up being a little more severe a response than anticipated, but Max didn't know what he was doing until that exact moment and it just happened."
"And then what?" Alex prompted, softly now.

"Well, then we covered it up." Michael gave Max a pleading look, wordlessly requesting backup. He really had no idea what Alex wanted him to say.

"Yeah, I mean, we just went on with our lives. We monitored her for the best part of a year, I think, but the little blackouts stopped after a few weeks. There's no evidence she had any more until late senior year."

"And what did Isobel do while you monitored her?"

"Complained about us being on her case, what else? Alex, man, spit it out. I can't see where you're trying to get us to go so just shove us there already." Michael knew he sounded grumpy but it truly was going right over his head.

Alex sighed. "You took away her agency, Michael. Every time you guys covered something else up, smoothed something else over, you denied Isobel the chance to understand and to heal. To move forward." He tried to drive the point home. "In protecting her so aggressively, you added to the damage. Exponentially."

Michael made a shushing motion at Max when he opened his mouth, keeping his eyes on Alex. "So you think that we, what, turned her into a killer?" his pitch rose with each word.

"No," Alex shook his head firmly. "No, there is definitely something weird there. But you might have been able to catch it early enough to prevent her from becoming a killer, if you hadn't been so focused on keeping her wrapped up in cotton wool."

"Oh." Michael saw the instant Alex's meaning hit Max in his widening eyes, the horror creeping across his face. He pinched the bridge of his nose, letting the weight of comprehension settle on his shoulders, seep into his bones.

When Michael finally spoke, bitterness dripped from him. "As it happens, yeah, there was more in my life that I managed to royally fuck up. Awesome. Max, you'd better have beer in the fridge." He stalked to the kitchen, not waiting for a response.

"That's a hard truth." Unshed tears were thick in Max's voice, and Alex nodded.

"Yeah. I know. The truth often sucks but we need to face it anyway, Max," Alex spoke softly, compassionately. "That's the whole idea behind this plan, circling the wagons, so to speak. You're vulnerable without that pooled knowledge."

Alex heard glass clinking and then the hiss of escaping carbonation. The sequence repeated twice more and he had to admit that beer wouldn't go amiss right now. He could always sleep on Max's couch if it came to that.

[end chapter thirteen]
I actually had most of this chapter written before I watched 1x07. The similarities in some of the themes pleased me. :D
~Tas
Beer and Pizza

*I'm going to order pizza."

Michael looked at Alex and they both laughed. Max just looked confused.

"What's funny about that?"

"Nothing," Alex smiled. "I was complaining before that I live too far out of town for delivery. We had barbecue instead."

"I love a good barbecue but that takes more of an attention span than I have available right now," Max shrugged his good shoulder. "What do you like, Alex? Michael, I assume yours hasn't changed?"

"Same," Michael confirmed. He listened idly as they decided what to order, his mind wandering while he drank. It was so normal, checking out the menu for Max's favourite takeaway. He felt dissociated from it all. He'd eat, because it would be put in front of him, but he wasn't hungry and he didn't care about consuming anything beyond the bitter liquid sliding down his throat.

He did laugh when Alex all but took over the ordering process. Michael always got the same thing, and always had to wait for Max and Isobel both to dither over their options. He'd learned to let it roll off him but apparently the waffling was new to Alex. "So bossy, Manes."

"As I recall, you like it when I'm bossy."

Michael went still at the casual innuendo, looking up at Alex through his eyelashes. He cleared his throat but his voice came out rough, "Alex."

Shit. Alex had relaxed some and he'd spoken without thinking. "Sorry. I'm sorry. That wasn't appropriate." Or fair, considering he kept telling Michael to knock it off with the flirting. His flippancy had been a total autopilot response to Michael calling him bossy, which had previously only been said in situations that, well, didn't involve company.

Michael nodded and shrugged. Not much he could say to that. He glanced over at Max, attention caught by his brother's sudden head movement. "What?"

"You lied to my face." He sounded... amazed, maybe? Not upset, anyway, and Michael scowled at him.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Prom, when we were chasing after Isobel. I asked you point blank if something was going on between you and Alex and you said no."

Oh, that. Michael sighed. "I didn't lie to you, Max. Nothing was going on."

"Bullshit, Michael. I saw your face after the fight."

"Yeahhh," he drawled. "I was standing right in front of you and you've got decent eyesight. Congratulations. I still didn't lie to you."
Max looked heavenward. "Okay, fine. Sometime after prom, then."

Michael avoided looking at anyone, simply shaking his head and drinking his beer. It wasn't his question to answer.

Alex knew Michael was leaving it up to him. After all, he'd been the one having a panic over the possibility of Isobel knowing. He knew how much it had hurt Michael.

He also knew he couldn't ask everyone else for their honesty if he wasn't willing to do the same. Alex nodded. "Yeah, it started a couple weeks later. And we've gotten together, off and on, over the years." He met Max's eyes, tilting his chin up slightly, subtly defiant. The last thing Michael needed was for Max to tear into him about his sexuality.

But Max just returned the nod, looking thoughtful. "And now?"

Wasn't that the $64,000 question? "We're..." Alex sucked on his bottom lip, entirely uncertain how to finish the sentence. Finally he concluded, "Friends."

Alex's phone beeped and he saw the text alert. "Liz will be here in five. I'm going to meet her outside. Just, uh, order me whatever I said. Or whatever Guerin's having."

He escaped, knowing full well it was an escape and feeling like a coward but also relieved.

Michael watched him, letting out a harsh laugh once the door had closed. "Friends. Fuck. I guess we are, at that." They'd done a good impression the past two days.

"Michael?" Max's real question was in his eyes, his expression, the gentleness with which he spoke Michael's name.

The answer was no. Michael was not okay. He made an attempt at a smile. "Alex is... He's my Liz, Max. And I am just as fucked as you are." He leaned over to clink his bottle against Max's.

"Oh, man," soft with understanding. A pause, and then, "I'll get out the whiskey."

[end chapter fourteen]
Enter Liz, on International Women's Day. This seems appropriate to me!

Also, I believe I'm all caught up on comments now but if I missed something, my apologies. Thank you to everyone who's still reading, whether you're commenting or not. I really appreciate it. <3
~Tas

---

"I don't like it."

"I know. But ---"  

"I don't like it," Liz repeated forcefully, glaring at Alex. He held up his hand in acknowledgement and fell silent, letting her continue, "but you're right. They need help. And I do not want anything to do with genocide, which is what will happen if the government gets hold of them."

"Yeah, that's where my head went, too." He could breathe a sigh of relief now that he'd gotten through to Liz.

"So you ended up involved in this because of a weird artefact that you took to Michael?"

"More or less," he hedged, then sighed. He was going to have to explain about Michael to everyone, anyway. "We kind of have a thing, or we did. Since just before graduation."

"Wait, you and Michael? I thought he was straight. Maria says he's hooked up with half the women in town."

Alex shrugged. "I don't know how he identifies. We've never talked about it. Behaviourally, he's flexible, at least where I'm concerned." The label didn't matter to him.

"Wow. So since high school? Not all continuously, I'm guessing?"

"No. More off than on, really, but," he shook his head. "It's complicated."

"Alex. What isn't complicated with these people?" Liz raised her eyebrows and they both laughed.

"Touché."

She sobered and examined his face. "You seem super calm about all this."

"Mission mode. Crisis now, feelings later, am I right?"

"Yeah," he admitted with a small smile.

"Me, too." Impulsively she hugged him, and Alex heard the rest spoken beside his ear. "This is one of the reasons I love you. You get it."
"Love you too, Liz." It felt good to be held and Alex hugged back hard.

They broke apart at the sound of an approaching car. When it came into view, Alex grinned. "They did order the pizza."

"I'm going to steal some of yours. That's my price for coming to this house tonight."

"One I'll gladly pay." Which he was going to do now, passing a credit card to the delivery driver and gesturing for him to stack the six boxes on the closest chair. Apparently Max had anticipated feeding a crowd. Or staying in for days, who knew? Cooking one-handed was a pain in the ass. He smiled at Liz once the car was gone. "I'm, uh, gonna need some help here."

"Sure. You get the door, I'll get the pizza."

"That works." He made his way back to the house, slower than he'd like. He'd pushed it last night and it meant that he'd tire more easily the next couple days. No way around it. Today hadn't been physically taxing, but Alex couldn't say listening to Michael's life story, asking questions and getting honest answers, hadn't taken it out of him, too.

Alex could see Michael and Max through the open blinds on the door. They clinked shot glasses and downed the contents in near perfect unison, putting the glasses close together on the table as soon as they were empty, and Max filled them back up. Oh, boy. Just how drunk had they gotten while Alex had been out here talking to Liz?

"Hey," he alerted her before grabbing the door handle. "Looks like we chatted and they chugged, so you know."

"Oh, great. Well, I expect Max will either be even more of a dick than he's been recently, or he'll get all maudlin and moepy. But as it's his place, you can put him to bed if you have to."

"Me? Why me?" Alex protested.

"Because I am not doing it, that's why," her tone was absolute.

"Fair enough." He didn't know exactly how she felt about Max, just that there were feelings, and it was complicated. Of course.

Swinging the door open, Alex held it for Liz, standing out of the way until she'd passed him, and following her in.

[end chapter fifteen]
Interactions with Matter

* * * *

Food had smoothed out Liz's entrance, giving everyone something else to focus on. Michael was amused that had been a bit of a theme the past few days. It wasn't something he was used to as part of his own life so much. Convivial meals weren't exactly a feature of growing up in group and foster homes.

He leaned back on the couch with a full glass of whiskey, just sipping at it now, and watched Alex and Max negotiate splitting the bill while Liz put the remaining pizza in the fridge. Social niceties easing friction. It was such an Evans thing.

And such a human thing.

He held in a laugh when the consensus was for Max to PayPal exactly half to Alex and everyone got out their phones. It was weird, seeing the two of them talking. Politely, but neither man backing down. He was used to Max taking charge; Max had always been the leader of the trio, the one who made the final decisions. Michael and Isobel had ways of influencing Max, getting him to see their viewpoints, but when the decision got made, it was made by Max, and binding on all of them.

Until recently. Michael had chosen to tell Isobel the truth about the night Rosa died, after Max had explicitly forbidden it. He'd chosen to tell Alex the truth about everything without asking anyone's opinion or permission. He needed to become his own person - to stop being so caught in the middle of everyone else's shit that he was paralysed.

Michael didn't think Max would have a how-to book about that on his groaning shelves.

Alex slipped his phone back into his pocket, content with the outcome. He knew Max was accustomed to getting his own way but Alex wasn't about to roll over. Even on something as seemingly simple as who paid for the takeout.

He saw a shadow cross Max's face, still looking at his phone. "Problem?" Alex enquired.

"I guess we'll find out," Max widened his eyes in exaggerated effect. "Izzy's here." He waved at Michael to stay seated. "My turn, man. You told her. I need to explain it to her myself."

Michael sank back, nodding. He might have protested more but he'd had more than enough heart-to-hearts today already. Max could take this one.

Alex dropped into the nearby chair and smiled at Liz when she came back over with three open beers. "Thanks."

"Same," Michael echoed.

"Welcome." She perched on the other chair. They were all silent for a few minutes, drinking separately but together.

Alex eventually spoke up. "Liz, did you bring the autopsy photo? Would you mind showing it to me?" He glanced at Michael and amended, "To us?"

"Yeah." She lifted up enough to withdraw a folded piece of paper from her back pocket and passed it to him.
Unfolding it, Alex had a moment of heart-wrenching grief at the image of Rosa, her dead eyes seeming to stare at him. He swallowed against the emotion and began to examine the picture, noting details.

"I thought there was a fire?" he phrased it carefully.

"There was, yeah. Started in the engine block," Michael nodded, sounding bleak.

Alex looked at Liz. She shrugged, her pain achingly clear. "There aren't visible burns. I know. I can't explain it, either."

"What?" Michael was paying full attention now. "Let me see that."

The outline of fingers across Rosa's face hit Michael like a freight train, bringing flashes of memory: Isobel's hand over Rosa's mouth; Rosa gripping Isobel's arm in an attempt to dislodge her; the limp crumple when Isobel let her go. His breath came faster as he stared at the photo and something in the room began to rattle.

Alex heard it and leaned forward, touching Michael's knee. "Guerin."

Michael threw him a furious look but he closed his eyes, hearing a mental echo of Alex's voice, low and soothing, telling him to breathe. He did. Slow, even, deep breaths. Letting the rage drain out into the ether.

The photo was still there when Michael opened his eyes and he made a small sound, holding his left hand out in the same position as the mark on Rosa's face. "I don't understand. I thought she smothered her."

He put his hand over his own mouth, pinching his nostrils to close off his air, needing to check, again, that it was possible. The effort it took with his mangled knuckles was considerable and it fucking hurt, but it worked and Michael only let go when the need to breathe became urgent.

Michael dropped the photo, trusting one of them would pick it up, and put his head between his knees, trying not to hyperventilate. "It's not possible. It's not possible."

Alex and Liz exchanged a look once she'd rescued the photo. He could see wet tracks on her cheeks, fresh tears spilling slowly to add their stain. She whispered, "Max said something similar when he saw the handprint."

"Guerin?" Alex touched his knee again, concerned, as Liz moved to sit beside him on the couch.

"What isn't possible, Michael? What?" she demanded.

Michael twisted to look up at her. "The handprint. Only Max can do that. Isobel and I have tried. Her, her powers, they don't even have a physical component, not really. In order affect matter, she has to use, like, an intermediary. Someone whose neural energy she's influenced to convince them to act."

"And you don't leave a handprint if you exert kinetic energy on a person?" Liz pressed.

"No. I can receive it, like, Max can leave a mark on me from healing a wound, and same on Isobel, but we can't do it ourselves. I mean, not to ourselves, and not to other people, either," Michael clarified. He felt like the world had tilted under his feet.

"So, when you and Max say this isn't possible, you mean Isobel shouldn't have been able to leave a
mark like this? She shouldn't have been able to kill with her powers. Is that what you mean?" Liz spoke rapidly, gesturing at the photo.

Michael straightened, angling to look at her head on. "Yeah. That's exactly what I mean. Her powers don't do that. And I saw... Fuck," he paused, swallowing. "I swear I saw someone else looking back at me, out of her eyes. But then she fainted, and Max couldn't revive Rosa, and..." Michael's jaw clenched as he worked to hold back the flood of emotion, unable to complete the sentence. Liz was crying freely now and he didn't dare look at Alex. "Excuse me."

Michael rose to his feet and headed for the bathroom. He locked the door and leaned against it, trembling. And breathing.

[end chapter sixteen]
Starlit Edges

Chapter Notes

I've edited the fic tags to include 'Angst with a happy ending'. Because, well. Accuracy matters!

Thanks for sticking with me through the slow burn storyline. *mwah*
~Tas

* * * * *

The crackling of the fireplace filled the otherwise silent room. Alex stroked Liz's hair; she seemed to have stopped crying, but he didn't know for sure because her face was still pressed into his shoulder. Michael hadn't come back yet. For all Alex knew, he'd gone to join his siblings.

The quiet interlude was welcome, if the reason for it wasn't. He had told Michael and Max earlier that something weird had to have been going on with Isobel when the murders happened. But it was looking like it might be a whole lot more complicated than mere weirdness.

Liz stirred finally and Alex let his hand drop, giving her the freedom to move. "You okay?"

"For now," she nodded. "I hate falling apart like that but I think I needed it. Thanks for the shoulder loan."

"Any time," he smiled.

"I guess we're back to square one in a way, if Isobel wasn't Isobel at the time." Liz sighed and scrubbed at her cheeks, wiping away the moisture. "I thought we'd answered all the Ws except 'why' but it looks like 'who' is back on the to-do list."

"Maybe." Alex couldn't tell if that was good or bad from her tone. "How do you feel about that?"

"Ambivalent. It probably means a complete understanding will take longer, but at the same time, it might make better sense," she mused. "I mean, I do know that trauma can do some bizarre, horrible things to one's brain, and what happened to Isobel on the camping trip all those years ago obviously did traumatise her. But it felt like there had to be more to it, you know? And as it turns out, there is."

"Yeah. So we backtrack a little, re-examine everything and go from there."

"Yep."

The renewed conviction in the single word made Alex smile. "That's my girl."

She smiled in return. "Speaking of yours, did you want to go check on Michael? He was pretty upset, too."

"Are you going to be okay in here on your own if Max and Isobel come inside?" He did want to check, but he also didn't want to abandon Liz. And he was ignoring her phrasing.
"I'll be okay. I don't feel unsafe, anyway."

"Good. I'll try not to be too long," he reassured her.

Liz smiled again and shook her head. "Go. Take care of your heart."

Alex raised an eyebrow and she laughed. "Go!"

He went. The bathroom door was open, no one inside, but Alex spotted a door to the side yard. He would bet Michael had gone outside.

Michael heard the side door open and he knew, without turning around, it was Alex. The slow thumping gait confirmed it. He didn't move, simply waited for Alex to come to him. He wasn't sure he'd ever done that before.

He looked over at Alex when he drew even, and nodded in greeting. "Hey."

"Hey," Alex echoed. There wasn't any outdoor lighting on this side of the house; only starlight outlined Michael's form. He was accustomed to seeing Michael in sunshine, everything about him kissed by gold, but the ethereal quality of a clear, moonless night suited him, too.

Or maybe it was just that Alex would find him beautiful in total darkness.

Rolling his eyes at himself, Alex spoke softly. "Liz is calmer now. How about you?"

A quicksilver smile graced Michael's mouth. "I'm breathing."

"So you are," Alex chuckled.

"The photo changes so much about that night. We thought Isobel had been buying drugs from Rosa. That she had, like, the worst ever acid trip and it gave her a psychotic episode. And because we watched her like hawks for months and she didn't take anything and she'd, you know, killed her dealer, it seemed like an isolated incident."

"Yeah, I get that." There wasn't a good spin - it had been murder - but the version Michael had outlined was pretty straightforward, and it had fit the facts as they'd known them.

"I didn't mean to be so explicit in front of Liz," Michael apologised. He could only imagine how hard that had been for her.

"It's okay. None of this is easy. For anyone."

"Yeah." Couldn't dispute that. Michael regarded the empty glass in his hand, twisting it to watch the play of light along the reflective surface. He'd have been fine to drive home from Alex's cabin last night, safety wise if not quite by breathalyser standards, but he wasn't going to even attempt to get behind the wheel tonight.

Especially not when he needed another refill.

Michael suddenly pitched the glass, watching it arc through the air, away from the house. When it reached the apex, he focused his mind on it and the glass exploded, shards and splinters of sparkle expanding until they struck the bubble of their enclosure, kinetic power contained within an invisible sphere.

It looked like a snow globe, Alex thought. He watched the defined space lower to the ground and dissolve, bits of glass settling into the gravel.
"What was that for?" he asked quietly. It almost felt strange to speak after the overt display of power. Of Michael's otherness. It had felt deliberate, in a different way to the experiment in the forest yesterday, and there had been beauty in the destruction.

Michael shrugged. "It was empty." He didn't have a better reason.

There was something in Michael's voice Alex couldn't identify. He moved to stand in front of him, searching his eyes, glittering dark green in the starlight. A stray curl fell across his forehead and Alex reached up to brush it back.

But his hand lingered, fingers greedy for the shape of Michael's jaw, for his cheek pressed against Alex's palm.

Michael stood transfixed, rooted to the spot by the caress. No one else touched him like this. Like he was precious. Worth something.

It was a bad idea. Alex knew it. He knew Michael knew it. But when Alex leaned forward, Michael met him halfway in the gentlest of kisses.

Alex's eyes slipped closed at the familiar taste of Michael, laced with whiskey and a hint of pepperoni. He felt Michael's hands sliding up his shoulders, neck, coming to rest just below his ear lobes, cradling him. His own hand shifted farther back to cup the nape of Michael's neck, feel the soft texture of his hair.

It felt infinite to Michael, the minutes they spent holding each other, lips connecting in a slow rhythm that had more to do with comfort than lust. He'd missed this so much.

And that was why Michael pulled back, pressing their foreheads together when he ended the kiss. It took him a little longer to find his voice. "I can't."

"Guerin ---"

"I can't," Michael repeated. He could feel tears prickling his eyeballs, thickening in his throat, but they wouldn't fall. "You know, now. You know everything. Good, bad, ugly, illegal, all of it. And I," he had to stop, take a breath, swallow against the urge to run. He was done hiding, done with secrets, but that didn't make it easy to say some truths aloud.

"That makes it different. We've kept doing this together, apart, together, apart, thing all these years and I can't do it again. You know now," he emphasised. "You know, and if you walked away, knowing, there would be no way back from that for me. I'd shatter like that glass and the pieces would blend into the desert floor, with no hope of rebuilding."

Alex nodded, understanding, unable to get any words past the tightness in his own throat. He gave Michael's cheek a last caress and stepped back once Michael let him go. He still couldn't speak as Michael turned towards the house.

A few feet away, Michael halted. In the continued silence from Alex, he realised there was still one sort of secret, something he believed Alex knew but Michael had never said aloud.

"Manes." He didn't change direction, looking over his shoulder at the expanse of sky as he spoke, wanting to make sure Alex heard him but unable to face him at the same time.

Alex waited, not wanting to scare him off by speaking. Not knowing what the hell to say.

"I love you." The words had an unexpected magic outside of Michael's head. He didn't think he'd
said them to anyone, ever, and he hadn't been prepared for the way it made him feel. "I have since you gave me your brother's guitar. I will as long as I'm still breathing. And I want you with me." He smiled a little, finishing, "Ball's in your court, man."

The returned cockiness in Michael's tone broke Alex's frozen stance but he remained silent as he watched Michael go into Max's.

Of all the things Michael had told him the past two days, this last one was what shook Alex. He moved in a daze, walking over to look at the slivers of glass. A larger piece caught his eye and Alex bent to collect it, careful of the sharp edges as he put it in his jeans pocket.

He'd keep it somewhere he could see it often, to remind himself what the stakes were. Michael had never said no before and the fact that he had, and the way he had, meant Alex had a lot to think about.

[end chapter seventeen]
The first place Michael went upon re-entry was the kitchen, snagging a slice of pizza from the array available and a decent sized replacement glass. He reprised his seat on the couch and smiled at Liz while he poured out a good measure of liquor. "I see you applied precision organisation techniques to Max's fridge. Holdover from well labelled lab samples, huh?"

"Ha. Yeah, I guess so," her answering smile was wan, echoing her posture, curled up in the far corner of the couch.

"I'm sorry, about before. Well, about all of it, but I mean the photograph." Maybe he shouldn't mention it, maybe it'd make things worse, but it wasn't like Michael had any road map for this kind of discussion.

Liz shrugged and nodded. He chose to interpret it as, apology accepted.

"How are you?" she asked instead, and Michael blinked at her.

"Me? Fine. Confused, granted, but that's nothing new."

"Yeah, I guess so," Liz huffed a laugh. She shook her head. "I'm tired, you know? So tired of being angry. Of everything hurting so much."

"I hear you there," Michael agreed fervently. He tilted the whiskey towards her. "Want some of this? Or another beer?"

Liz made an indecisive face then sighed. "Yeahhh. Pass me the bottle."

Michael chuckled and handed it over, amused. He couldn't say he'd expected to be sharing a couch and a bottle with Liz Ortecho, of all people, but here they were.

He relaxed and they sat in a companionable enough silence, each nursing a drink and their own thoughts.

Alex found them there, Liz asleep in a tight curl against the end pillow, Michael sprawled on the other end with his head resting over the back of the couch. His eyes were closed and Alex took a second to appreciate the long stretch of his throat.

"Still no Max or Isobel?" he whispered.

Michael's eyes fluttered open to lazily regard Alex. "Nope. I was gonna go check on them, but I'm comfy and I didn't want to wake Liz, so."

Alex chuckled. "It may have been overly ambitious of me to think that we could get everyone up to speed and on the same page all tonight. Especially since Kyle has a night shift."

"Maybe a little bit," Michael drawled. They shared a quiet laugh and his stomach settled, because Alex clearly didn't hold it against him for setting boundaries.

"I think I'll check, if you don't mind?" Alex canted his head to one side, relieved at the ease of the
"Be my guest," he waved towards the door and closed his eyes again with a sigh.

Alex couldn't help but laugh at the supreme laziness and he saw Michael's lips curve in a smirk. He rolled his eyes and went out front.

Max and Isobel were huddled together under a brightly coloured blanket on the little patio couch, the firepit throwing shadows across them. Alex approached slowly, giving them time to object to his presence.

"You guys need a drink or a snack or anything?" Alex specifically avoided asking if they were okay. He was pretty sure of the answer, anyway.

"Hi, Alex," Isobel gave him a tremulous smile. She'd clearly been crying. "Are you going to feed me every time I see you now?" It lacked the sass and energy Isobel usually had, but it was a good effort and Alex treated it in kind.

"Well, I can if you want me to," he smiled. "Right now, Max has enough pizza that you could have a large all to yourself, if you'd like."

She laughed a little. "Yeah, maybe not." Her gaze sharpened. "You aren't treating me any differently to yesterday."

Alex shrugged. "Should I be?"

"I'm a killer, you know. Max told me that you know everything now, so you know that, too." Her voice wobbled.

"What I know, is this: you were involved in the murders of three people. You were seen with one of them at the time of her death, by a reliable witness who states that the person he saw looking out of your eyes during this occurrence was not the same person he's known his entire life. And, the post-mortem appearance of a handprint on the corpse is a mark left by the use of a type of power you do not possess." Alex laid it out as logically as he could, appreciating the irony of him doing it and not Liz.

"What are you saying?" Max frowned. Isobel had her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

"I'm saying the three of you are guilty of covering up what happened, but we don't yet know exactly what did happen. There are inconsistencies in the facts."

"And how do you propose to find out what did happen?" Max wanted to know.

"By asking the questions you and Guerin buried that night by choosing to lie to Isobel," he said bluntly.

Max hissed in frustration. "You want to put Isobel through questioning?" He was about to say more but Isobel squeezed his shoulder.

"Max, please. You need to stop. I want to ask questions. I want to try to remember," she insisted. "Alex is trying to help, so quit being such a dipshit."

It wouldn't be smart to burst out laughing at the look Max gave her, so Alex managed to squash the urge. Instead he offered, "Look, the only way to truly get past trauma is to deal with it head on. It isn't fun, but it's a damn sight better than living in fear."
Max looked at his crutch, exactly as Alex had expected, then back up to meet Alex's eyes. He nodded, and so did Alex in turn.

"But not tonight," Max sighed. "I'm beat and I can't imagine the rest of you are much better."

"Agreed. Liz is catnapping already, actually, but I'll wake her and take her home." Alex did not want her spending the night, or driving. "She and Guerin polished off the bottle of whatever after we talked about the autopsy photo."

Isobel sniffled, and Alex and Max looked at each other. "Best to start fresh in the morning with that, yeah?" Alex suggested, interpreting the worry in Max's gaze.

"Yeah," she agreed, flinging back the blanket and standing. "I think I'll go in the side door now. Liz... She and I don't need to see each other right now."

"Good idea," Max nodded.

Isobel stopped in front of Alex, just looking at his face for a long moment - long enough that Alex began to feel uncomfortable. He cleared his throat and she smiled, then gave him a brief hug and wandered off.

"What was that about?" he asked Max, furrowing his brow.

"Hell if I know," Max snorted. "She's like a cat sometimes. My guess is that she's decided she likes you."

"Oh. Well, that's good, I guess."

Max got to his feet. "Listen, I'm going to follow Isobel in. It'll be easier for Liz if she doesn't have to go past me, either."

_Easier for you, too_, Alex thought. But what he said was, "Do you want me to tell Guerin? I assume he's staying over."

"Yeah. Tell him the three of us can talk in the morning."

With that, he was gone, leaving Alex staring at the flames.

[end chapter eighteen]
Michael could smell coffee.

That meant he wasn't alone, and therefore he also wasn't at home. He never took his hook-ups to the Airstream.

He lay still, letting his brain rouse slowly, awareness of his surroundings creeping in. The abrupt whiff of Chanel No. 5 sealed it.

"Iz." Michael opened his eyes to see her leaning over him. "Didja make enough for me?"

"Of course." She moved back as he sat up. He had a twinge of apprehension at something in her tone but he couldn't be bothered to care about it, watching as Isobel went to the kitchen.

He vaguely remembered that Alex had driven Liz home, and hoped she wasn't too hungover.

"Two thirds coffee, one third remover," Isobel said cheerily, holding a large mug. When Michael reached for it, she pulled it away.

"The fuck, Iz?" He was so not in the mood for games.

"There's a price. I have questions."

He groaned. "You can ask whatever you want, as long as it's not about my sex life. After coffee." Michael saw the uncertainty beneath her playfulness and added, "I promise."

Michael never said that to Isobel unless he meant it, and she knew it. Her face brightened again and she handed him the mug.

"Thank you." He guzzled half of it, the acetone hitting his system in a welcome rush, clearing the fuzziness from his head. He sighed, leaning back. "All right, Izzy. Shoot."

"Tell me about Alex."

Yep, it was exactly what he'd figured she wanted to talk about. "That's not a question."

"Michael," her exasperation came through clearly.

He sighed. "Isobel, just ask me some actual fucking questions, okay? I spent yesterday freestyling it and I'm spontaneous utteranced out."

"Okay, fine. Why didn't you say anything before?"
"Because we weren't together long enough at any one time to call it a relationship."

"Not even at the beginning?"

The beginning. Michael wasn't sure when that was. He supposed technically, it was that kiss in the museum, but it felt like it had been a little earlier than that - when they hadn't kissed, because Michael had chickened out. Because he hadn't been able to identify what he was feeling. He knew now.

"Michael?" she prompted gently.

"No, not then." He didn't want to tell her, didn't want her to understand the impact of the timeline, but he admitted, "It was just before what happened to Rosa."

"Oh, Michael. I'm so sorry."

"It changed a lot of things, Isobel. And there were some other complications, too," but he was not going to talk about Alex's father. Not in this life.

"Yeah," her voice was sad.

"Anyway, now you know."

"But you're not together right now. Max said you were friends?"

Michael sighed. She was giving him more of a headache than the remnants of hangover. "Friends is as good a word as any."

"Have you been 'on' at all since he got stationed here? I know you didn't go to the parade."

"Yeah, Iz. For about a week, maybe? And then we both fucked it up with the same old shit and now we're friends." Michael could hear the unhappy anger in his own voice and he pushed off the couch.

"Want some pizza?"

"I ate already, thanks."

"Suit yourself." He banged around the kitchen, taking petty satisfaction at Max's peeved tone when he showed up.

"Jesus, Michael, you don't have to kill it before you eat it, you know. What crawled up your butt and died?"

"Isobel wants to know all about my feelings. She even tried to hold the coffee hostage."

Max paused mid-pour and chuckled. "That's just cruel and unusual punishment, that is."

"I know, right?" Michael knew he was being childish but he couldn't seem to help it.

Isobel yelled from the other room, "I just want SOMEONE to be happy! Is that too much to ask?"

Michael started to laugh. He shifted so he could see her over the breakfast bar. "And you think I'm the best option for that, of the three of us? Wake the fuck up, Mrs. Evans-Bracken."

"Michael," Max chided.

"What? She's been married for like seven years to a great guy who loves and adores her. You like him, I like him, your parents like him, and she actually loves Noah back," he was on a roll now.
"Eight years, asshole!"

"Fuck, eight? I obviously did alright suppressing the memory of being stuck in a penguin suit."

Isobel got up in a huff. He expected her to storm off, the way she had when they'd argued as kids, but she came into the kitchen and crowded Michael against the cupboards, poking him in the chest with her index finger for every word she spoke.

"What is the matter with you this morning?"

"Ow, Jesus, Iz. Stop it."

She narrowed her eyes at him and poked him again. "Answer the question."

"What do you want from me?"

She repeated it, poking harder this time. Michael often forgot how tall Isobel had ended up being, until she barged into his personal space. "Answer. The. Question."

"I'm not allowed to be happy, alright? Any time I get close, the universe reminds me I'm discarded trash and I don't deserve happiness," Michael exploded. He saw shock hit Isobel first, Max close behind her, and he could feel the surge of power and the prickle of tears both.

He knocked Isobel's hand away and pushed past her, striding outside where he could be alone.

Alone except for the quiet murmur in his mind, reminding him to breathe.

The power, Michael controlled. The tears, he couldn't. He wanted to cry and scream and rage the way Isobel did, but he wasn't built for it. They filmed over his eyeballs and hung there. Stubborn bastards.

He settled for good old-fashioned human kinetic energy, throwing rocks into the desert beyond, focusing on sending each rock that little bit further, until the repetition created enough of a rhythm to begin the process of calming himself down.

[end chapter nineteen]
Alex was having a weird day. Although truthfully, the weirdest part about it was how ordinary most of it had been: eat breakfast alone in his cabin; don his uniform; drive to work; do his job. There weren't even any real crises, only minor niggles with the building plans and scheduling. Totally normal for a project this size.

But he knew now that the facility his team was working on, genuinely was going to be built on a historical site. The crash site. Where his on-again, off-again lover/boyfriend/whatever had come to Earth in a spaceship, cocooned in some kind of gestational pod.

It was doing his head in a little bit.

What didn't help any was the persistent mental echo of that person's voice. *I love you.*

It had been Michael who'd admitted feelings in the first place, all those years ago. Alex had just wanted to check that Michael had some idea of what was going to happen, in the physical sense. Then Michael had bravely put his heart out there and that next sweet kiss had seen Alex falling hard.

Today, he was finding it difficult to remember why he'd had any objections.

He passed off his quiet mood as too much beer and not enough sleep - Alex was hardly the only one feeling that way after their 2-day leave.

The unusual part of the day came near the end of it, when Alex was summoned to see his commanding officer.

He knocked on the part open door and stuck his head in. "You wanted to see me, ma'am?"

"Captain Manes, yes. Come in and close the door."

"Yes, ma'am." He did exactly that then stood at attention in front of her.

"At ease. Take a seat," she gestured at the chairs on his side of the desk and he joined her. "How's the leg today? No crutch, I see?"

"Yeah, the physio said I'm walking well, so it was time. It's another stage to get used to, but so far, so good. Thank you for asking," he smiled. He got on well with his CO. She was a no-nonsense, 'give me the facts' kind of person, and she cared about the airmen under her command.

"Good stuff." She steepled her fingers and regarded him with a piercing enough look that Alex started to get concerned.
"Captain, it's come to my attention that you have been renewing your previous relationships with town residents here, and that some of these individuals might not be suitable friends for a man of your rank." Her voice was completely neutral but the words sparked a tight ball of fury in Alex's chest.

*Fuck you, Dad.* He knew exactly how she'd come by the information. His next thought was to remind himself to thank Liz later for teaching him to be thorough when doing his homework.

"Yes, ma'am. As you know, I grew up in Roswell, so now that I'm stationed here, I have been reconnecting with some people. We've spoken about that before," because he'd been anxious and he'd gone to her to discuss it. When she nodded, Alex continued, "Is there a more specific concern? I mean, I know my friends, and actually Maria DeLuca was one of the interviewees when I got my security clearance renewed recently as part of my return to active duty, so I can't see anyone objecting to the fact that she owns a bar at this point."

She checked a paper inside the file folder on her desk blotter. "The concern was raised about an individual by the name of Michael Guerin. You do know him?"

"Yes, we went to high school together. We both hung around the music room a lot. I actually ran into him in present day because he was one of the ranch hands who were displaced when we purchased the dairy ranches for the new facility. He was forced to find a new job. Well, an old one, kind of - he'd worked part-time at the junkyard in high school. Mr. Sanders obviously thought enough of him to re-hire him."

"I see. And his criminal record?"

"I heard that same rumour, ma'am, so I checked it out with the Sheriff's Department. Another of my friends is a deputy there," he was more than happy to lean on Max's community standing. "Mr. Guerin has been arrested previously for misdemeanour offences, but he has had no convictions, and nothing has even gone to trial. The bar at which the alleged fights occurred was the one that Maria owns, and she has never pressed charges against Mr. Guerin."

"So there isn't a criminal record per se," she nodded. "Captain, thank you for your diligence in upholding Air Force standards. If you are confident this individual does not pose a risk, I'm content to rely on your judgement."

"I trust him," Alex stated.

"Good. Case closed." She deposited the file folder in her desk drawer and Alex breathed a silent sigh of relief. Then she gave him a wicked grin. "Music room, huh? I heard about your cover band."

"Oh, God," Alex groaned. "I didn't know that would follow me Stateside!"

"Something about Aerosmith?"

"We changed it every time we played, to the worst Aerosmith cover band name we could think of at the time. It was me, Taylor, and Stevens. Someone said their names didn't quite make Steven Tyler, and it kind of snowballed from there," he explained with a laugh. "You know how it goes."

"I do," she acknowledged. "You still in contact?"

"Yeah, all the time. I miss them."

"And being in the field?" she watched him intently.
Alex gave a small shrug and a half smile. "I'd be lying if I said an unqualified no, but I'm enjoying being here again, and having my own place. Never had that before and it's been really good."

"You seem to have settled in well, yes." She glanced at the drawer where the folder had been put away.

"Permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

"Of course, Alex. Go ahead."

It took him a minute to organise what he wanted to say in his head before he opened his mouth. "I'm not a teenager anymore. I've let my piercings grow over, and I could probably manage to put eyeliner on still but I'd have to buy some first. There are people, though, who will never see me as anything but a child."

They both knew who Alex was talking about. And blaming the parental perception of perpetual immaturity was a socially acceptable way to distance himself from his father.

She inclined her head. "As ever, thank you for your candour and your diplomacy." Her eyes went to the clock. "And I've kept you past your shift end, I see. You'll have to tell me more about your band later."

Alex laughed. "Happy to, ma'am. I'll bring my guitar next time."

"All right. Dismissed. Go home."

He stood. "Thank you, ma'am."

* * * * *

Home wasn't where Alex ended up.

He changed into civvies before heading into town, straight to the Wild Pony. He wasn't sure if he did or didn't hope to run into Michael there. Either way, he wanted to see Maria.

"Alex!" Maria came around the bar to envelop him in a hug.

"Hey, you," he squeezed her tight.

"What're you doing here? You didn't let Guerin drink the rest of your beer, didja?"

"No, no, just the empties you already collected," Alex smiled. Michael was nowhere to be seen and apparently that was disappointing. "I actually came by to ask a favour. Do you still make the resin memory jewellery?"

"Of course. You have something you want set in resin?" Maria drew him along with her behind the bar, continuing to talk as she served a customer.

"Yeah, um," Alex pulled a folded paper towel from his jeans pocket, opening it carefully. "Mind your fingers, it's sharp."

"Piece of glass, huh? You want a bezel or just suspended in the resin? Rectangular, to go with the shape of the glass piece?"

Alex watched her poke at the glass, enjoying her creative process. "Rectangular, yeah, and just suspended. I want a 360 view."
"Colour preference? I assume you don't want glitter or anything."

"God, no, please no glitter!" he laughed. "I think, like, a dark gold? Not like gold jewellery kind of gold. More like late afternoon sun. Kind of, amber-y?"

"Really? Alex, you're losing gay cred by the second," she teased.

"Ha ha." He looked at the glass, picturing it encased.

"Pendant on a cord?"

"I hadn't really thought about it but yeah, that would be good. I'd like to keep it close."

"Definitely a pendant then." Maria rewrapped the glass and pocketed it. "So does this have to do with a guy?"

"What? Why do you keep going straight to a guy?" Alex protested.

"Because you have that look on your face again. Museum Guy face."

He sighed. "Maria, look. I don't want to lie to you, and I'm not ready to talk about this yet, okay?"

She smiled and chucked him under the chin. "Okay, honey. You can tell me when you're ready."

"I will," he promised.

"Give me two days, a'right? That'll give me enough time to make the piece and for the resin to set fully."

"Thanks, Maria. You're the best." Alex gave her another hug and she laughed.

"I know."

[end chapter twenty]
Alex had allowed Maria to talk him into staying for one drink, mostly because he hadn't heard from any of the others yet and he kind of wanted to bask in the normalcy of his longtime friendship. Well, inasmuch as the word 'normal' could be used to describe anything about Maria.

Bolstered by her warmth and gentle teasing, Alex was as ready as he was going to get when his phone buzzed with a text from Michael.

* Hey. You coming over to Max's? Still a fuckton of pizza you already paid for if you're hungry.*

He chuckled; had Michael ever sent him a text that didn't include profanity? None he could recall, though admittedly, there hadn't been all that many in total. He typed back.

* Yeah, be there soon. Anyone spoken to Kyle yet?*

* Don't think so.*

* I'll swing by his place first. Am in town atm.*

* All right. We'll be here when you get here.*

Alex slipped his phone back into his pocket and drove to Kyle's, knocking firmly at his front door.

"Hey, man," Kyle greeted him. "What brings you this way?"

"Well, I could say it was a practical demonstration of what can happen when you try knocking instead of breaking in," he raised his eyebrows and Kyle laughed.

"Yeah, yeah. Noted. You wanna come in?"

"Actually, I want you to come out. To Max's house," Alex clarified.

"To... Why?" Kyle's face was a study in confusion.

Alex sighed. "Liz told you something. I learned the same information elsewhere. I think we all need to get together and make sure we know the same things."

Kyle nodded, slow and thoughtful. "I haven't had a chance to tell Liz about Rosa yet. I'm still getting to grips with it myself, honestly."

Alex snorted. "You're not alone in needing some processing time, dude."

"I guess I'm not at that," Kyle gave a half smile. He sighed. "So is this, like, going to be an overnight thing, or...?"

"Maybe?" Alex shrugged. "I have to be on base for 08:00 tomorrow so I won't be drinking, but I'm happy to play DD if you want to go in my car."

"Yeah. Yeah, maybe that's a good idea. Can we stop at the grocery store? I should bring my own anaesthesia," he made a wry face and Alex chuckled.
"Sure, we can stop."

* * * * *

Michael had been grateful for the chance to escape into work for the afternoon, getting some satisfaction from the physical exertion necessary to complete the car repairs. Knowing it meant a paycheque didn't suck, either.

He'd tolerated the eggshells Max and Isobel had been walking on since his outburst. It was a tradeoff for neither of them trying to make him talk about his feelings after that.

But now he was back at Max's, with Alex and Kyle incoming.

Yeah, Michael would probably be sleeping on the couch again tonight. He didn't plan to be fit to drive.

He looked up as Max joined him on the patio, nodding in thanks as Max passed him an open beer and sank onto the chair opposite him.

"Liz coming?" Michael enquired.

Max shook his head. "She's covering her dad's shift at the Crashdown. He had some treatment thing earlier and isn't feeling great."

"Fair enough. Alex is bringing Valenti."

"Great," his tone indicated it was anything but.

"Yep."

They fell silent, each man lost in his own thoughts while the sun began to lower in the sky, drenching the world in molten gold.

Alex pulled in to park and sat for several minutes once he'd turned the ignition off, entranced by the way Michael all but glowed. If he could have described this colour to Maria, he would have.

The spell broke when Kyle cleared his throat. "I'll admit the curly hair looks good in the sunshine, but Guerin, Alex? Really?"

Alex braced his forearms on the steering wheel and put his head in his hands. "Oh, man, Kyle. You have no idea."

He started at the light touch to his elbow. "So tell me." Kyle's voice was quiet, supportive. Unexpected.

Sitting back upright, Alex sighed again. "We've been doing this kind of thing," he moved his palms together and apart in a wave-like motion, "for years now. Since high school, actually."

"Prom? That why he told me to get off you when we started fighting?"

"Yeah," Alex looked at his hands, remembering what it had felt like to punch Kyle. It seemed like an entirely different lifetime. "We weren't together, together yet then, but, yeah."

"Why'd you go off to the Academy that summer, then? Bad breakup?"

"If only. No, that was about my dad. He --- he caught us. Not in flagrante delicto but he missed that
by like, 10 minutes. It..." he trailed off with a shiver of searing memory.

"He didn't take it well."

"Understatement," Alex nodded. "Going to the Academy was the best way to keep us both safe."

"I see." The words were clipped, and it felt good to know that Kyle was angry on his behalf. Alex had told him enough about Jesse Manes that Kyle would be mentally filling in details now. They wouldn't be accurate details - the level of hatred that led to smashing a teenager's bones was almost impossible to imagine for someone who hadn't lived through it - but the details weren't what mattered in this context. Getting Kyle to understand Alex's need to protect Michael from his father was the important part.

"So which side of that wave are you guys on now?" Kyle asked after another few minutes had passed. He sounded thoughtful rather than angry now.

"Apart."

"And where do you want to be?"

Alex huffed a laugh. "That, Kyle, is a question that's keeping me up at night." He shook his head, staring at his hands on the steering wheel. "I know where he stands, and what he wants. I need to figure out if I'm capable of giving him that."

"So you're what, hands off until you know the answer?"

"Well, yeah. He's right, I can't keep jerking him around and expecting him to keep taking me back after I keep fucking off."

Kyle's low chuckle surprised Alex. "You have got it bad, my friend."

Alex groaned. "I know. I just..." he couldn't bring himself to admit aloud that no matter what Michael felt now, he was sure it would fade and die once they'd been together for a while. Alex just wasn't lovable, long-term.

He looked over when Kyle patted his shoulder. "As it happens, Manes, I am an excellent wingman."

"Are you offering to help me with my relationship with Guerin?" Alex asked with a disbelieving laugh.

"Why not?" he shrugged. "If you both have strong feelings more than a decade later, I think that's the definition of a love worth fighting for." He smiled, self-deprecating. "Look, Liz and I have hooked up in recent weeks, and, it was nice. You know, everybody had a good time and all, but it didn't leave me feeling anything like what I see in you, talking about Guerin. I care a lot about Liz but I'm not in love with her, and if we're never anything more than friends in the future, I'd be totally happy with that. Can you say the same?"

Alex exhaled forcefully. "Truth? No."

"That's what I thought."

He gave in. It wasn't like Alex had been batting a thousand by not having anyone helping. And maybe this could allow him to find a way to re-establish a friendship with Kyle, too, after they'd both grown as people. "All right, wingman, try not to let me fuck this up."
"I will do my best, sir." Alex shot him a dirty look and he grinned.

"I can't believe this is my life these days," Alex mock complained, and they finally exited the vehicle.

[end chapter twenty-one]
"So, that's all of it. Everything I know. And sharing it gets me a place on the threat level red list," Kyle finished with a sigh. "Not that showing the file to Liz didn't already do that, anyway."

Michael had started to watch Alex as Kyle's narrative had made it clear that Jesse Manes was up to his eyeballs in whatever the fuck was going on, and he was impressed, by both the breadth of the fury building in Alex and his absolute control over it.

If Michael was being honest with himself, he found it kind of hot.

Which was good, really, because it distracted Michael from his own approaching-homicidal-level rage.

"Okay," Alex leaned back with a sigh. He didn't know why any of this had come as a surprise, especially after his chat this afternoon. He looked over the three other men, checking for their reactions.

Guilt was uppermost for Kyle, obviously struggling with the fact that he'd invited the fox into the hen house by telling the Chief about the handprint. Max looked close to panic. And Michael....

Well. Michael's mind was clearly on something else entirely, and that shouldn't have surprised Alex either, but the heated gaze locked on him was, indeed, unexpected at this particular moment. At least nothing was levitating.

Alex just raised his eyebrows at Michael and then addressed the group. "That gels with my day. I got pulled into my CO's office - uh, my commanding officer," he had to remember they weren't government people and he needed to spell out his acronyms.

"You in trouble?" Kyle frowned. "What for?" Like he couldn't imagine Alex doing anything that might warrant a dressing down.

"Not exactly. Turns out, someone informed her that certain of my old acquaintances might not be suitable friends for me anymore. Specifically, the potential criminal history of one Mr. Guerin."

"Isn't that why you asked me about Michael's arrest record before? So you could back it up with the facts?" Max asked. Neither of them looked at Michael as Alex nodded.

"What, so now you two are talking about me behind my back? What the fuck, Max? Isn't there such a thing as privacy laws?" Michael burst out.

"Yeah. Unless the PATRIOT Act is invoked and you cease to have any rights," Alex stated flatly. "Which is what Kyle's talking about."

"I know all about the Act," Michael huffed.

Alex had preferred the sex gaze. This, he had little patience with. He'd originally wanted to discuss it with Michael in private, but it seemed to affect everyone after all, so he forged ahead, icily polite. "I
work in military intelligence, Guerin. I have a very high security clearance. That places constraints on who I'm able to associate with. And if I flout those constraints, I could lose my clearance, among other possible consequences, so I have to take it seriously. That means not hanging out with anyone with a criminal record. At all."

"And you're okay on that front with regards to Michael," Max asserted.

Alex nodded at Max but didn't take his eyes off Michael. "Yeah. I explained that to her, confirmed that I didn't consider Guerin a security risk, and told her I trusted him."

"You said that to your boss?" The anger had bled out of Michael's voice.

"I did. And she took me at my word, so I'd appreciate it if you don't make a liar out of me."

Michael nodded, looking down and away. Quietly, "Message received." It hadn't occurred to him his behaviour could have that much potential impact on someone else's life. On Alex's life, even if they were only friends. He didn't want to be responsible for fucking anything else up for Alex.

"Thank you." Alex kept it simple but he put everything he could into those two words, saturating them with gratitude and caring. He saw the corners of Michael's mouth turn up in response and smiled himself.

Kyle cleared his throat. "So I just want to check, here. We know how the Act works on us as civilians. But what about you, Alex? If everything goes to hell and you're found consorting with aliens, aiding and abetting or whatever, in contravention of a classified project, what are you risking?"

Alex shrugged. "It'd depend on a lot of factors. Worst case scenario, probably court-martial for treason." He'd already thought it all through and made his peace with the risk.

Max whistled long and low. Before he could speak, though, Alex waved him off. "Still better than vivisection, dude."

"Your risk tolerance is crazy high, Manes," Kyle told him.

"No," Alex refuted with a small, sad smile. There was so much more he could have done in the past if that were true, but it wasn't. Not really. "No, I've just lost my tolerance for not doing the right thing," he sighed.

"Still. Thanks." Michael could look at Alex again now and he did, trying to visually return the sentiment he'd heard a minute ago.

"You're welcome." The reply was automatic, manners drilled into Alex, but with the way Michael stared at him, Alex felt caught in a time loop, half expecting to see his brother's guitar on Michael's lap. His skin felt hot and he knew, knew that if he leaned in the same way as he had then, Michael wouldn't pull away now.

Even if he should, because this wasn't the time or place, and Alex wasn't ready to go all-in yet.

"Who wants marshmallows?" Kyle exclaimed, and Michael couldn't not turn to give him a WTF look.

"Marshmallows, Valenti?"

"Yeah, you know, put 'em on a stick, hold 'em over the fire here?" he grinned. "I don't have an
outdoor firepit so I brought marshmallows and skewers."

Max chimed in, "I have fondue forks, actually. They're awesome for toasting."

"I bet you still eat fondue, doncha," Michael drawled, unable to refrain from teasing. It interrupted the connection between him and Alex and that was probably for the best, because Michael had been two minutes away from throwing it all into the wind and kissing the daylights out of Alex.

"What? I like cheese!" Max protested.

"Yeah, we know, Max. You're the cheesemeister," Michael quipped, laughing, and Kyle joined in.

Alex thunked his head against the back of his chair, closing his eyes as he mustered some order over his emotions while the others joked around. He owed Kyle one.

[end chapter twenty-two]

Chapter End Notes

One of the difficulties of writing canon divergent fic is when something that's currently still part of your fic plot, has been completely annihilated by more recent show canon (See: Alex Manes, badass, S01E08).

Nonetheless. *carries on*

By the way, I'm also on Tumblr, same username. I don't post a great deal but my ask box is open. :+

~Tas
Conversation had fizzled some time ago in favour of drinking, at least for the other three men. Alex tended the fire and wished he had something more exciting than orange juice. Well, at least he was getting his vitamins. Alex didn't think he'd eaten this much pizza in such a short time span since he'd graduated.

In the absence of liquor to distract him, Alex found himself craving a cigarette. It was a bad habit he'd picked up and discarded during his first deployment. He sighed. "Sitting around not drinking is pretty much the only time I still want a smoke."

"You smoked?" Kyle said it first but they were all looking askance at Alex and he laughed.

"Yeah, for a couple of years, mostly out of curiosity and boredom. Even growing up in a small town didn't really prepare me for how insanely boring military life can be."

"That's saying something, if you were actually missing the Roswell night life," Michael chuckled.

"Seriously. Maria thought it was hilarious, though."

"She would, seeing as she's responsible for a lot of it these days." Michael would know.

"You had to do something besides smoking for fun. C'mon, 'fess up," Max encouraged.

"Says the cop. Now he's not gonna tell us anything," Michael pointed accusingly at Max.

"There's nothing all that interesting, Guerin," Alex rolled his eyes. "Those of us who are actually gay tend not to participate in the gay chicken kind of stuff. On account of not being chicken and all, even before DADT was repealed. I did a lot of spectating."

"Gay chicken?" Max repeated. "That thing where two straight guys kiss until one of them pulls away?"

Alex bit his lip, trying not to laugh. He saw Kyle having the same problem and it got more difficult to hold it back.

Michael flat out facepalmed. "Max, man. You gotta read something that was published in this century."

That was it. Kyle cracked up and it cascaded around the circle until they were all gasping for air, Max included.

Finally Alex managed to speak. "You're right about the original definition, Max. It's kind of evolved
since then. Especially in situations where you have a bunch of people who are stuck somewhere together, bored out of their trees, and who entrust their lives to each other. Personal boundaries blur. A lot.

The others were starting to regain their composure as Alex continued, "I was one of the more private people but I still copped for every joke going about being a secret phone sex operator after I started doing running commentary on the, uh, challenges. Sometimes it was like narrating soft-core porn."

"Really?" Kyle interjected. "It never got to that level at med school."

"Oh, I know what the medical unit was up to, Valenti. Who needs to play chicken when you can have a recreational IV party?" Alex laughed.

"Okay, okay. I mean, how else are you going to learn to administer intravenous medication if you don't practice on your friends?" Kyle batted his eyelashes in exaggerated innocence.

Max heaved a sigh. "I lead a sheltered life."

"You do, man, you do," Michael agreed.

"How come you know all this, Michael? You didn't leave town, either," Max asked.

Michael snorted. "Because my reading material is on the Internet, not in an antiquities shop."

"All right, I get it, I need to modernise beyond the iPhone."

Murmurs of agreement greeted that statement.

"Anyone know of any good modern Russian literature?" Max deadpanned.

Michael threw a marshmallow at him.

* * * * *

In the end, Kyle passed out on the couch, and Michael put Max to bed with his phone after installing the Urban Dictionary app.

"It's possible we've created a monster," he complained as he rejoined Alex outside.

"Ha. Well, it won't hurt him."

"No, you're right. It'll hurt me when he starts trying to use all his new vocabulary."

"You'll live."

"True." Michael eyed the man sat across from him, tracing the flicker of firelight across the sharp planes of his features and the spiky mess of his hair. "So. Cigarettes and soft-core, huh?"

Alex chuckled. "I thought you might pick up on that."

"Oh hell yeah," he agreed, fervently, and had to laugh at himself. "I definitely noticed."

"Michael..."

"Yeah, no, I wasn't about to ask for a demo, Alex," he reassured. "Just, letting you know I'm interested, I guess."
"I wasn't --- I didn't mean to sound like I was chewing you out or anything. I'm sorry if it came across that way," Alex was flustered. He'd handled it badly before, like at the drive-in, and he didn't want to keep himself safe at Michael's expense.

Michael shrugged. "I might need the occasional reminder not to flirt with you." It hadn't felt mean. On point, to be honest.

"Yeah. Me, too," Alex admitted, giving him a soft smile.

"Good to know." Michael took a deep breath and changed the subject, before he was tempted any further. "So this Project Shepherd thing is scary as fuck."

"It is. I'll start looking into it tomorrow." Alex didn't have any suitable equipment with him so it would have to wait until he had enough time at home.

Michael frowned. "Is that safe? I mean, you said your security clearance was high, but won't it leave a trace if you go poking around at work?"

*Here comes the hypocrisy.* Alex bit his lip. "I wasn't planning to go through official channels."

"You..." Michael narrowed his eyes, realising what Alex meant. "You're going to hack in, aren't you? That's your fancy high security skill set. Codebreaking."

No point in denying it. "Yes."

"I can't even be mad. I feel like I should be, considering our discussion earlier, but," Michael sighed. "I'm not going to presume to tell you what you can and can't do, either."

"Thank you."

"You got what you need to do that back at the cabin?"

Alex tilted his head. "Why do I have the feeling that if I said no, you'd be able to help me get it?"

Michael looked at the fire, debating what to say, then looked up at Alex through his eyelashes, making a rueful face. "I may have a laptop rigged up with a VPN and multiple proxy server routing specifically for accessing the dark web."

"Of course you do." Alex sighed and put his face in his hands. He fought the impulse to laugh and finally met Michael's gaze, unable to keep from grinning. "What am I going to do with you, Guérin?"

"That's not a question you wanna ask me if you don't want me to flirt," Michael drawled with an answering smirk.

"Fair." Alex did laugh now. He hesitated only briefly before enquiring, "I don't suppose you have it anywhere nearby?"

"Alex Manes. You wouldn't be suggesting we break the law together, now, would you?" Michael's eyebrows climbed to his hairline in semi-feigned shock.

*In for a penny, in for a pound, right? "I might be suggesting exactly that.*"

"Then I might have it in a secret compartment in the truck."

Alex's jaw dropped. "Get out. You have a secret compartment?"
"More than one, yep," Michael enjoyed his reaction.

"Holy shit. You gotta show me," he demanded, standing. Recent bunker discoveries aside, Alex loved finding hideaways and delving into their mysteries. It was part of why he was so good at his job.

Michael rose to his feet, too, leading the way to his truck. He kept glancing at Alex, amused at how excited he was. When he'd unlocked and opened the passenger side door, Alex crowded close, and Michael paused. "You're sure you wanna do this?"

"I'm sure." He appreciated the check in, though.

"Okay." Michael watched him all but vibrating with anticipation, those big brown eyes sparkling. He was gorgeous and Michael let out a soft growl. "You need to back up if you don't want to be kissed, Manes."

The sound tingled all the way down Alex's spine, sparking an instant response. Images of exploring Michael's mouth replaced thoughts of other secret compartments, changing the nature of his excitement. He licked his lips. "What if I do want to, but I don't want it to hurt you? Because it wouldn't be a step forward or an answer, just an interlude?"

Michael's eyes darkened, gaze drawn to the flicker of tongue. "I'll take my chances."

He stepped forward, intending to press Alex against the side of the truck.

Alex, however, had other ideas. He hopped onto the passenger seat, legs outside the cab facing Michael, and beckoned, "C'mere."

Now Michael moved closer, wedging his body in between Alex's knees. The pads of his fingers followed the shape of Alex's face in the pattern he'd seen the firelight paint. He brushed his thumb over parted lips, the way Alex did to him, and shivered at the barely there lick.

Alex echoed the gesture, soft glide of fingers over stubble and silk. He grasped Michael's chin and drew him down. It was his move, had to be, even with the last minute arrangements that this was a pause, an interlude --- a stolen moment outside of time.

Michael went with him, knowing what Alex was offering even if neither could articulate it well. Words had never been their strongest method of communication. This was better, easier, more deeply understood as he covered that beautiful mouth with his own.

And pulled back just enough to murmur, impish, "You taste like Florida sunshine."

Alex laughed and wrapped his arms around Michael's torso, pulling him flush. "Allow me to wake you up, then." He tilted up to recapture Michael's mouth, deepening the kiss immediately, infusing it with all the heat he could muster.

Michael groaned, responding in kind. And yet there was no urgency. This moment was both journey and goal. They weren't going to end up in bed, with all the complications that inevitably ensued. Another stray thought occurred and he had to chuckle.

"What?" Alex prompted, smiling against his mouth.

"Just thought, maybe we needed to be staring down 30 before we could keep our hands off each other long enough to actually talk."
"Maybe we did at that. Or maybe it's because I jerk off before I spend time with you now, take the edge off," Alex's tone was pure mischief.

Michael pulled back to stare at him, disbelieving. "You're not serious?"

Alex grinned and wagged his eyebrows. He hadn't exactly planned on the revelation, but it was too good an opportunity to tease Michael. "Yeah. Suggestion from a friend on how to keep a clear head around someone you really want to fuck."

Shaking his head, Michael laughed. "You're crazy, Manes. I love you."

Not until they were deep into the next kiss did Michael realise what he'd said, and by then, it was abundantly clear that it had been okay.

More than okay to Alex. The offhand remark almost meant more than the recent starlit declaration, for how ordinary and unguarded it felt. He threw everything he had into kissing Michael. Alex wasn't ready to move beyond this yet but he could let Michael know in no uncertain terms that his words, his kisses, his emotions were welcomed.

They let it wind down naturally, passion drifting into sweet, almost chaste presses of lips to lips, cheeks, foreheads, eyelids.

Alex was first to open his eyes, his hold on Michael shifting so he could touch his face, watch the glide of his fingertips.

Michael eventually let himself meet Alex's gaze and what he found there knocked the breath out of him. Such incredible openness. And fear. Not of Michael, or at least not the way he'd always assumed would be aimed at him; it wasn't fear of what Michael was. It was terror of who they might become together, and what the cost might be. He recognised it by its resonance with his own fears but Alex's was next level.

Alex knew the moment it clicked for Michael and he squelched the urge to close off, needing to show him everything Alex couldn't yet bring himself to say.

Needing Michael to be the one to say no again.

Michael nodded eventually, dipping his head to press a last kiss to Alex's reddened lips. He let his hands drop to his sides and when Alex followed suit, Michael stepped back, out of his embrace.

He smirked, dropping them back into reality. "Let's hack."

[end chapter twenty-three]
Breaking Memories

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for discussion of violence. Bit of a hard one, guys.
~Tas

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

* * * * *

Michael sat back in the desk chair as Max entered the living room, hair sticking up every which way. "How you feeling?"

He laughed at the irritable grunt of an answer. Clearly the worse for wear. Michael drank the last of his coffee, grimacing at its cooled temperature, and resumed typing.

"Why is my ironing board out? Do I want to know?" Max lowered himself to one of the stools at the breakfast bar.

"Alex needed to press his uniform. I made him sleep for a while on the, you know, the built-in thing," Michael pointed at the long padded bench seat in the corner he could never remember the proper name for. "It got late and his place is out of town the other way to the base, so he would've spent a stupid amount of time driving instead of sleeping if he'd've gone home."

Max nodded, and Michael noticed he was starting to perk up, so he'd clearly cut his coffee with a good amount of remover. "Did you sleep?"

"Not yet," Michael admitted.

"Okay. So what are you doing, then? That's the laptop that officially I don't know exists, right?"

"Yep. And if you'd asked me yesterday, I would've said I was hacking." He looked over at Max, offering a half smile. "Today, I am merely monitoring what Alex set up last night."

"That good, huh?"

Michael chuckled. "Remember the first time you went to the shooting range with Jenna? And you said you ended up feeling like you'd never touched a gun before in comparison?"

"Shit," Max sounded impressed. "Found anything out yet?"

Michael tapped at the keyboard again then left it alone, standing up to stretch. "Yeah. The funding for Project Shepherd was cut a few years back. I can't tell if it was shut down or pushed off the books; Alex is going to have to go after that info. I'm, uh," he huffed a laugh, "I'm at the limit of my computer abilities."

"Fair enough. It's not really kinetic enough to fall into your area of expertise."

"Funny guy," Michael rolled his eyes. "By the way, on the petty victory front, Valenti snores." He waved at the couch's occupant on his way to the kitchen for a refill.
"Only when I've been drinking," came a rough voice and Michael laughed, getting out a second mug.

"Coffee, Kyle?"

"Please."

Michael put the mug on the table and sank into a chair as Kyle sat up, groaning. "Feeling a little delicate, are we?"

"Nothing that some food and a run won't cure. After the coffee," he chuckled. "Thanks."

Michael simply nodded. "I'll run you home when you're ready. No rush, just Alex said he was supposed to be your ride, so."

"Appreciate it. I heard, what you said about the Project. I didn't see anyone at the site besides Chief Manes. No other people, vehicles, nothing. But that could support either version of the shutdown."

"Good to know still. Any intel is valuable, and could help Alex ferret out the truth."

Kyle nodded, sipping his coffee. "The hacking his idea?"

"Yeah. I provided the equipment and an assist." Michael bristled, "I didn't talk him into it, if that's what you're getting at."

"Just checking. He was pretty adamant about his security clearance yesterday," Kyle spoke in a mild tone that Michael suspected he'd learned working in a hospital. In some circumstances, it would irritate Michael all the more, but he allowed it to soothe as intended.

"He was, yeah. But he failed to mention that his clearance is because he's a codebreaker. He gets paid to hack highly sensitive, complex data, and he's really fucking good at it." Michael had never found it interesting to watch someone type before.

Max added, "And he'd know what to look for, being Air Force himself. So if he's willing to take the risk...."

"Yeah," Kyle nodded. "I'm sure the possibility of being able to stick it to his old man adds to the appeal."

Michael looked sharply at him, catching a hint of anger in his voice. Kyle met his gaze, pursing his lips. "Yeah, I know now. I didn't then."

"Then, you were part of the problem, Valenti," he shot back.

"I was. I can't excuse my behaviour from back then. I can only do better in the present and future," Kyle agreed readily. "But - and this isn't an excuse - but, the dust-up at prom that you helped stop, Guerin, was the only time I ever laid a hand on Alex. Before that, it was all verbal, and there was no after. Liz breaking up with me on the spot was the first clue I bought. Interning in the ER did the rest."

Michael nodded, his mouth set in a hard line. "Yeah. What you did was shitty but it doesn't hold a candle to Chief Master Asshole's actions."

"I might have to steal that, Chief Master Asshole. I like it," Kyle chuckled.

"Feel free, man."
"Are you saying that Alex's father was doing the same kind of stuff you got at the group home?" Max asked, brow furrowing.

Sometimes Michael envied Max's naïveté. "More or less. The Manes family isn't religious so he probably didn't try to exorcise Alex, but knock him around on the regular, yeah."

"They tried to exorcise you?" Kyle's voice hit a painfully high note.

"Oh, yeah. Scar's pretty faint now." Michael pulled the sleeve of his hoodie up to his elbow, leaning over to show Kyle the misshapen cross burned on his left inner forearm.

Kyle bent to see the mark and shook his head. "Unbelievable." Then he took Michael's wrist and gently turned it over, looking at the mess that was Michael's left hand. "And what happened here?"

"Um," Michael faltered, tensing immediately. He went to pull away but Kyle's grip firmed. The other man's expression showed more compassion than Michael was used to having directed at him and it disarmed him some. He tried to relax, letting Kyle examine his hand.

"You treated it yourself, I assume? Did you use a splint or a cast?" His fingers prodded gently at the damaged flesh.

"Splint, yeah. I couldn't get medical help, for the obvious reason. I didn't have insurance, anyway. Still don't," he shrugged. It was weird, having someone paying such close attention to his hand. Most people chose to ignore that there was anything different about it as soon as they noticed it.

"That was a fight, wasn't it, Michael? You said the guy wrecked your hand," Max provided the explanation he knew.

"This didn't happen from a fist fight. Maybe a boot stomp," Kyle theorised, flicking a glance at Michael. He tried to manipulate the pinky finger.

"Ow, that doesn't bend anymore, Valenti!"

"I can see that. The bones seem to have fused together when it healed. Looks like the outer two knuckles of your hand were shattered, too, and a bit lighter damage to the middle one."

"Tell me something I don't know," Michael grumbled.

"Definitely a smaller impact surface than a boot." Kyle traced the thick ridges where the broken skin had knit together poorly. "Ever considered reconstructive surgery?"

"What part of no doctors and no insurance wasn't clear?" Michael demanded. He tried to pull away again but Kyle had a good enough hold on him that Michael would need to resort to a violent move to get loose. He wasn't there yet. "I don't need your pity, Valenti."

"I didn't offer you any pity," Kyle glanced up. And, Michael had to concede, he didn't see pity in the man's eyes. That boundless compassion still shone there, alongside curiosity, in multiple flavours. "You have significantly reduced function in your left hand, but you make a living doing jobs that require manual labour and fine motor skills. You haven't let your disability get in the way and I think that's admirable."

Michael stared at him, completely taken aback. "Who are you?"

Kyle laughed. "Didn't I just tell you I've done a lot of growing up? But lest you think it's all altruism, I'm a surgical resident and I find your hand professionally intriguing."
Now that, Michael could understand. "Uh-huh, so you want to know how it got that way so you can figure out if you'd be able to put it back together."

"Pretty much, yep."

"As long as it's a hypothetical question."

"Like I said, resident; I'm not qualified for the non hypothetical yet. Plus, hand surgeons are usually specialists," Kyle clarified.

Michael shrugged. "I can understand the urge to figure out how something's put together." It was, after all, one of the core themes of his life. And did it really matter? It wasn't like Kyle was going to be able to infer the full context, and Max had never questioned the story about the fight.

"I should hope so, you take shit apart and reassemble it every day," Max snorted.

"All right, so. Braced on a workbench like this, yeah?" Michael moved to flatten his palm against the surface of the coffee table once Kyle let go. He was curious himself now. Framing it as investigating a repair job allowed him to detach from the actual incident and look at his hand dispassionately.

He touched the spots where the blows had fallen, starting with the outermost joint of his pinky finger. "Here, here, here, here, and here," he ended on the knuckle below his middle finger, the one that hadn't connected full-on and so hadn't shattered the bones the same way, leaving him with most of its function intact. "Six hits, flat head of a standard claw hammer."

Michael looked up after a few minutes of silence to find both men staring at him. "What?"

"Why'd you stay in place long enough for six hits?" Max asked, aghast.

"They were in quick succession, man, and frankly, I was in so much pain that I froze for a minute. It's not like I stood there going, hey, hit me again," Michael rolled his eyes. He looked at Kyle. "Anything else you want to know?"

"Yeah. Can I?" he nodded at Michael's hand.

Michael held it out. "Go nuts."

While Kyle poked and prodded at the impact points, Michael had a wordless conversation with Max.

Or he tried to, but Max insisted on speaking. "I wish you would have let me heal you. I never knew it was that bad."

Michael sighed. "Look, like I told you at the time, there were witnesses. I couldn't magically have an uninjured hand. And you were so wrecked after failing to heal Rosa, you probably would have managed to like, dissolve the remaining bones or something."

"But I should have ---"


"Fine." Great, there it was, the 'whatever' tone that Max hadn't yet grown out of. Michael really couldn't be bothered dealing with Max the drama queen right now so he took the word at face value and ignored the tone.

"Guerin?"
"Hm? Yeah?" he looked at Kyle, puzzled by his expression. Had he found something weird? He was holding Michael's wrist with one hand and had the other palm-to-palm perpendicularly, with his thumb curled around to the back of Michael's hand.

"Did Jesse Manes do this to you?"

The air left the room. "What? Why would you ask me that?" Michael could only get out a whisper and it wasn't strong enough to refute Kyle's assertion.

"Because Alex used to hang out in the tool shed in his backyard all the time and I doubt that changed in high school, when he had even more reasons to want out of the house besides a little privacy. And I know his father caught you together and whatever happened rattled Alex enough to make him fall in line with the family plans and go to the Academy, so. I think this would qualify."

"He told you about that?" Michael hadn't counted on Kyle knowing anything and to hear it laid out like that felt a little like getting hit all over again.

"Not details, but yeah. Is that what happened?" Kyle had that soothing doctor voice back on.

"Michael?" He waved Max off; Michael couldn't deal with both of them and Kyle was by far the calmer one.

He cleared his throat but Michael couldn't speak at first, simply nodding.

"Did he injure Alex on that occasion?"

"He... He had Alex by the throat, and he was pushing so Alex was up on his toes just to breathe, and," Michael took a breath of his own, exhaling in a shudder. He continued, his voice thick with fury, "A hammer isn't a weapon you go for if you're intending the target to be able to get back up afterwards."

Kyle nodded slowly. "You believed his life was in danger."

"Yeah. I have never seen, hate, like that. I still believe he would have killed Alex right there and then if I hadn't intervened." He'd had nightmares for weeks afterwards where the look in Jesse Manes's eyes had followed and terrorised him. Where he hadn't acted and Alex had ended a crumpled, bloody corpse. The imagery had mixed with his memories of Rosa's death sometimes and he'd also watched helplessly while Isobel killed Alex in his dreams.

Michael realised the fine hair on his arms prickled, the way it did when his powers were rousing, and he closed his eyes briefly, focusing on his breathing. The irony that Alex had taught him a technique he needed to use now because he was angry about Alex wasn't lost on Michael.

He leaned back in the chair when Kyle gave his hand a light squeeze and finally let go.

"You okay?" Kyle asked.

Michael emitted a laugh, mirthless and tired. "I don't know if I'm qualified to answer that anymore, Valenti. Not after the last few days. It's like a fucking Hoover Dam broke in my brain and I can't shut it off."

Max's chuckle was fond. "You were the one who said we needed to get it all out there. And you were right. We did. We do."

"Excuse me, pardon me, I'm sorry, did you just say I was right?"
"I heard it too," Kyle confirmed. "Maybe he's been replaced by a pod person."

Max laughed. "Technically I've always been a pod person."

Kyle heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I'm going to have to find new material. Because I'm hanging out with actual fucking pod people."

Michael did laugh at that, silently grateful for the return of the bantering while he removed his heart from his sleeve and tucked it back into its metaphorical pocket, safe for now.

[end chapter twenty-four]

Chapter End Notes

For posterity's sake, the impact points on Michael's left hand, for this fic:
- Top joint, pinky finger
- Middle joint, pinky finger
- Base joint (knuckle), pinky finger
- Middle joint, ring finger
- Base joint (knuckle), ring finger
- Base joint (knuckle), middle finger, off-centre towards ring finger side
Nearly a week had gone by before Alex managed to show up at the Wild Pony again, a fact Maria wasn't about to let go easily.

Nor was she going to let Alex himself go, apparently. "Maria, I do need to be able to breathe."

"Fine," she huffed with a grin, releasing him from the hug. "Where've ya been?"

"Working. You know my schedule isn't any more regular than yours," he smiled. "I mean it's better on base than in the field, obviously - I get to go home to sleep, for one - but it's still pretty variable."

"Uh-huh. Looks like you're not getting enough of that sleep you mentioned," Maria patted his cheek beside the dark under eye smudge Alex knew was there.

"I'm doing okay. Got some projects on the go is all." He was proceeding extremely carefully with the alien intelligence gathering and unfortunately, that meant slow.

Of course, he wasn't going to tell that to Maria.

"Hm," she sounded unconvinced. "Well, just try not to burn the candle at both ends so much, a'right?"

"Yes, ma'am," Alex nodded, and she laughed.

"Jerk. Come into the back room, c'mon," Maria tugged on his hand and Alex followed her around the bar and through the door.

"Extra curing time won't hurt, anyway," she talked as she rummaged in the desk drawer, emerging with a small cloth bag. "Here's your pendant. I think it turned out nice."

Alex opened the bag and withdrew the deep gold oblong, pierced at one end with an antique bronze bail that wrapped around the black leather cording. The centre of the resin piece twinkled as he tilted it, light refracting from the jagged shard of glass safely encased there.

"Nice? Maria, it's amazing! Thank you." He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"You're most welcome. The cord is adjustable; you can wear it like a 90s choker or dangling at your navel like a flower child, and every point in between."

Alex laughed. "Definitely somewhere in between." He pulled it on over his head, manipulating the sliding knot until the pendant was flush against his breastbone, and then tucked it into his T-shirt, pleased at the way it sat.
"So, private memories, huh?" Maria prompted once he had it settled in place.

"Yeah, kind of." He knew she'd agreed to wait for an explanation, but Alex felt she deserved to know some of it now. "You were right. It does have to do with a guy. I don't want to talk about who or any of the details, but, it's kind of like, decision time on how we move forward. Well, if we move forward, I guess. And I've been... selfish... in the past, in our relationship. This," he touched the shape hidden against his chest, "is to help remind me to make sure that any decisions I make about us, are about us. Not me and my fear."

Maria nodded, silent as she digested that revelation, and Alex knew she had a million questions she wasn't asking because what he'd just told her was all he was comfortable saying now, and she respected that.

"You are a beautiful soul, Alex Manes," she finally stated and hugged him tight when he laughed.

"Thank you. What do I owe you for the pendant?"

She motioned for him to put his wallet away. "My price is the whole story about this guy, all the gory details, when you're ready."

"Deal," Alex agreed. "I will, however, buy myself a beer before I head home."

"And I will serve you one, even if you do look like I should be checking your ID," she teased, leading the way back into the bar.

"I am way over 21, Maria," he complained, following her. And nearly ran right into her when he spotted Michael on a bar stool, a half full neat glass and an open bottle of whiskey in front of him.

"Guerin, are you violating the health code again?" Maria demanded as she popped open a beer and passed it to Alex.

"You know it, DeLuca. It was all unattended and lonely," Michael drawled, flirting on automatic. His gaze was on the man behind her, though, and he grinned. "Hey, Alex. You might wanna wipe off the lipstick if you don't want anyone who doesn't know you to think you two were banging back there." He pointed to the corresponding spot on his own cheek.

"Oh, shit. Thanks," addressed to both Michael for the alert and Maria for the napkin she handed him. Alex rubbed it over his face, checking afterwards, "Gone?"

"Yep," Maria confirmed. "Sorry for that! You going to sit here or get a table?"

"What's easier for you?" Alex wanted to know as he rounded the bar, rejoining the customer side.

Maria sighed. "As much as I'd love to chat with you, we are about to get really busy and if you're right there, it'll just piss me off when I don't have time to talk. So, go get a table." She pointed at Michael. "And take Guerin with you."

Michael made a wounded sound and clutched at his heart. "Aw, man, exiled."

She laughed, shooing him away. "Go. Now."

Her eyebrows raised when he picked up both glass and bottle but she didn't say anything so Michael figured he was safe enough for now. She'd light into him later. "Table preference, Manes?"

"Um, there looks good," Alex pointed at an unoccupied booth. He wasn't entirely sure how he'd
ended up having a drink with Michael when he'd come here to see Maria.

"Good choice." Michael slid into the booth, setting down his treasure. He smirked. "I'd ask if you come here often but I know you don't."

"Not really. Starting to, but it took me a while to want to participate in having a social life after I was stationed here," Alex admitted. "And most of the other airmen aren't local, so if I go out with them, we usually end up at Saturn's Rings."

"Yeah, fair enough. Maria is particular about keeping the Pony for locals." It felt natural to just have a conversation.

"She is, yeah. It has a, uh, unique ambiance," Alex's lips twitched.

"That it does," Michael laughed. His gaze took in the shadows on Alex's face. "You getting enough sleep? Your hours have been all over the place."

Alex rolled his eyes. "I already got it from Maria, Guerin. I'll have an early night I swear."

"See that you do." The stern tone was at complete odds with the cheeky grin. Michael continued in his normal voice, "Your project can wait."

"Yeah. The speed is frustrating me, but."

"Better paranoid than dead," Michael spoke low and firm.

"No argument here." Alex leaned back, drinking his beer while he looked over Michael. He smiled. "You, on the other hand, look well rested." *Edible, fuckable, downright gorgeous,* his brain kept going and Alex coughed.

"Why thank you." If that was meant to be code for something, Michael didn't know what. "Max is back at work tomorrow. Desk duty, but he's happy to be able to do something."

"I know what that's like. Being sidelined sucks," Alex stated emphatically.

"I can imagine." His only experience with it had been his broken hand in high school. Strange to have that truth out there, too. The phone call to Alex explaining the cat was out of the bag hadn't even been that bad. Of course, he'd been the one to tell Kyle the first half of the story.

Alex watched as Michael pulled a bottle of nail polish remover from his jacket pocket and poured some into his glass, topping it up with whiskey. He raised his eyebrows, "Doesn't anyone ask you about it?"

"Best guess I've heard is 151 proof rum. Maria can tell how drunk I am in about 30 seconds, which is not measured on the same scale as how much I've had to drink, and she's never said anything." He shrugged. "Nobody cares."

Alex nodded, putting the information with other things he'd observed over the last little while about Michael's drinking. "High-functioning or habitual?"

Michael's lips curved in pure cynicism. "I have to choose one?" He knocked back what he'd just poured and refilled the glass, sipping at it now with his eyes on Alex.

Alex met the look coolly, seeing the challenge there and understanding it. "Suppose not, it just usually is one or the other," he said, unruffled.
That took the wind right out of Michael's sails; it was hard to rebel against calm acceptance. He rolled his shoulders and looked away. "Used to be habitual. Probably the other way now."

"There are better coping mechanisms, but there are plenty worse ones, too."

Michael scoffed. "I think I could talk to you every damn day for the rest of my life and still get surprised by the shit that comes out of your mouth."

He hadn't thought about how that might sound until it was out there. Wary, Michael's gaze slipped back to meet brown eyes.

Alex couldn't fight the amused smile. Dryly, "I'm so glad I don't bore you."

"No, you don't." Heat uncurled in his stomach as Michael imagined some of the many, many ways he'd like to see Alex try not to bore him.

"Guerin," his voice wasn't as steady as he'd like but he forged ahead. "If you keep looking at me like that, I am not going to have an early night."

A cocky grin spread across Michael's face but he did drop his eyes. He knew he could push it. He knew Alex meant it, and if Michael chose, he could take Alex home and spend the night fucking him silly.

Just like all the other times they'd fallen into bed. And it would fuck things up just as thoroughly.

Michael had always thought the problem between them was defined by Alex pushing him away after they'd reconnected. It was only lately he'd begun to realise the true conflict came much earlier in their dance. Because it was Alex who couldn't say no when Michael asked, even when he wasn't ready for what might follow. The opposite of what it had been at the beginning, before Alex had gone to war and Michael had given up all his dreams to protect his family.

"Can't have that. You need your beauty sleep," he spoke gently, affection clear in his voice.

"Considering everyone's telling me how tired I look, I think you're right," Alex chuckled. He felt warm all over still from Michael's heat but while he didn't fully understand it yet, Alex was getting something he needed from Michael when Michael held firm and said no.

"Want me to walk you to the car?" Michael nodded at the near empty beer bottle.

"Yeah, sure." He drained it then looked for Maria at the bar. She was as busy as predicted so Alex wasn't going to try to talk to her. He could text her from home. "Let's go."

Michael followed him out the door, keeping to Alex's pace. Which was slower than he'd like and underscored the decision to not go over. "Text me when you get home?"

Alex blinked at him, turning from the car door. "Okay, if you really want me to."

"I really want you to. I like knowing you're safe," Michael smiled. He badly wanted to kiss Alex - nothing too risqué, just a goodnight kiss - but he knew Alex wasn't comfortable with public displays, even if he were out. He settled for clapping Alex's shoulder.

"Night, Guerin. I'll text you." With that Alex climbed into the vehicle and drove away, turning the evening over in his mind.

They were becoming friends. Alex supposed there was some minute possibility of them getting to be
such good friends that they didn't want to fuck anymore, but he really didn't see it happening. And in the meantime, this felt good. It felt right.

Even if he was going to need a cold shower when he got home.

[end chapter twenty-five]
The Ortecho living room hadn't changed any from Alex's teenage memories of it. He'd probably spent more time in Liz and Rosa's bedroom, though, hanging out with Liz and Maria. The exception to the 'no boys' rule.

Today it served as a central meeting place for the group. He sent Liz a reassuring smile, knowing it wasn't easy for her to share space with Isobel, and that would be worse when it was her own space. But she was a trooper and hadn't hesitated to play host.

For all of seven people, they sure could talk. Snippets of stem cell research, legalese, town gossip filled the air. Alex had been under the impression that Max was supposed to lead this thing but he was deep in conversation with his brother-in-law, Noah talking to him with one hand twisted practically behind him where Isobel clutched it and spoke with Michael on her other side.

He cleared his throat, gaze roaming over the assemblage. No one noticed. Well, time for a reminder that Alex was Air Force.

"ATTEN-TION!" he bellowed, concealing a laugh when six shocked pairs of eyes turned his way. They were quiet now, though, and Alex smirked. "Projection, people. It's a skill."

Michael had immediate inappropriate thoughts about that naughty little smile, but mostly he felt a surge of pride at the effortless way Alex had taken over. Max had been the leader all his life, by default more than anything - of the tiny pool of three options, he'd been the best. But their numbers were growing and Alex was trained to lead.

"I'm going to try to keep this short because I know we're all busy. In fact, it's taken some doing to get us all in the same room at the same time. Do you realise, not a single one of us has a standard 9-to-5 job?" he raised his eyebrows and there were scattered chuckles.

"First, Project Shepherd. Definitely shut down. But there is a trickle of a money trail coming from somewhere in the Pentagon, which dear old Dad has been padding with family funds. I hope my brothers aren't expecting much of an inheritance."

"The Pentagon, seriously?" Max whistled. "Shit."

"That's why it's taking you so long," Michael nodded at Alex.

"Indeed. When I'm day job hacking, into foreign enemy intelligence, I have a lot of protection around me, figuratively speaking. Getting caught would kill the mission but I'd be fine. Not so much with hacking into my own government." Alex shrugged. Neither the level of risk nor the glacial pace it dictated could be helped.
"Okay, so is there anything we can do to misdirect? You know, false information, whatever?" Kyle asked. "There's got to be something. I almost wish I hadn't broken it off with the Chief. I could have gotten intel from the inside."

"Kyle, you don't have the poker face for that," Liz shook her head.

"Yeah? We should totally have a poker night, then," Michael teased. He grinned when Kyle rolled his eyes and Liz laughed.

"Be social on your own time, Guerin," Alex chided with a smile.

Michael simply raised an eyebrow in reply, not letting on that the tone Alex had used sent a swirl of desire moving through him. Now was not the time.

Alex continued speaking. "I've installed a tech redirect. There's only been outgoing data from the bunker, no incoming, so I've basically hijacked it so those transmissions will come directly to me. I also have trackers on the money sources. We'll know if there's a sudden infusion of cash or a major withdrawal, either of which could signal a need to move."

There were nods around the room; good, he'd made it layperson friendly enough. Now for the hard stuff, emotionally at least.

"Most of us are being watched. Recorded. The focus is on the three of you," he indicated Michael, Max, and Isobel. "Obviously that spills over to Noah, and Kyle, I assume you're a target because you know about the Project. Liz, because Kyle got the autopsy file and my father would figure he'd show it to you."

"I don't suppose you could check whether he's put me on the terrorist watch list?" Kyle grimaced.

"You're clear. I have, however, removed Red over there from the proposed additions to the list and scrubbed all traces of the suggestion," he gestured towards Michael.


"Apparently you've been using me for the past decade plus to try to infiltrate the human race. Didn't you know?" Alex deadpanned.

Michael made a rude noise. "Dude, the only thing I've been trying to infiltrate since high school is your pants."

Alex opened his mouth but absolutely nothing came out. He had no idea how to respond to that. This wasn't public, public, and everyone here knew about their history and their not-quite-relationship current status, but he hadn't expected to hear anything so blatant. He could feel a flush creeping up his neck.

Isobel saved him by smacking Michael's arm. "TMI, Michael. Jeez."

"Sorry, sorry," and he was. It had just slipped out. He could see Alex was embarrassed and Michael made an apologetic face.

Taking a deep breath, Alex chose to ignore the whole thing. "Moving on. I think we need a designated safe space, and I think it needs to be Max's house. I'm able to use some of the existing footage to create loops to cover new activities, but that's a hell of a lot easier with Max's due to its location." He chewed on his lower lip. "I'm not crazy about all the glass if we need to defend it at some point, but that's pure hypothetical future and the surveillance is not."
"What about bulletproof lamination? Coat every window in the house?" Michael suggested.

Max held up a hand. "Whoa, wait a minute. I agree my place makes the most logical headquarters, but I don't have the money to get the windows done like that, even if I had the first clue where to get the glass film."

"I have the money," Noah spoke up. He gave a self-deprecating smile and shrugged. "Look, I'm a lawyer. I know my way around a courtroom but most of this is brand new to me and I'm very much still catching up." He glanced at Isobel, squeezing her hand. "But I do have money, and Max is family, so. I'll foot the bill." Noah's smile softened when Isobel leaned close to kiss his cheek.

"Okay then. Thanks, Noah. I can probably ---"

Michael interrupted. "I'll take care of it."

"You will?" Alex raised his eyebrows.

"Yep. I know a guy who knows a guy," he drawled, unable to resist phrasing it in the shadiest way possible, amused that the eyebrows had yet to go down.

"Are any of the guys in this chain of people going to require me to de-rouge you again, Guerin?"

He laughed. "Nah, shouldn't be a problem. Honest."

"Fine," Alex just shook his head. Some things about Michael would never change and he was learning to accept that. "In that case, you, Max, and Noah can coordinate on getting Max's windows laminated, preferably ASAP."

"Sounds good," Max agreed. "Anything else we need to do, besides stay alert? And keep using the burner phones for any sensitive communication?"

"Just that, really. We're in a holding pattern until either I get a hijacked transmission or something actually happens," Alex nodded slowly as he spoke. "Once your windows are done, we can put other safeguards in place, electronic and physical both."

"Yeah, okay. I'm also the most logical option for bulletproofing in cover story terms, since I did get shot a few weeks ago. And Noah helping with the cost for family reasons tracks, too."

"Exactly," Alex agreed.

The brief silence after the plans were settled was broken by a loud rumble from Kyle's stomach. "I am going to head downstairs and continue a 20-year tradition of stealing fries," he announced, to general laughter.

"Don't make me arrest you, Valenti," Max teased.

"I will poke you in the bad shoulder if you try, Evans."

Michael watched them file out, until he, Alex, and Liz were left. He walked over to where she sat. "Alright?"

"Yeah," Liz sighed. "I think I'm going to stay here, though."

"You want company?" Alex offered.

She smiled and shook her head. "You two go ahead. I'm going to get a cup of tea and relax for a
while. Clear my head."

Alex leaned down and hugged her. "Take care, yeah? Text me if you need anything."

"Or me. I live closer if it's time sensitive."

"I will."

At the top of the stairs, Alex stopped walking and gave Michael a look. "Infiltrate my pants? Really?"

"I did not mean to say that out loud, man. I'm sorry."

"Whatever, Red," Alex nudged him with an elbow.

Michael sighed. "That's gonna stick, isn't it?"

He sounded so resigned that Alex had to laugh. "It just might."

[end chapter twenty-six]
"Windows look good from the outside. How's the interior shot?" Michael asked as he entered Max's.

"Pretty good. There was a choice of a grey tint or this, so I went with the bronze-y one. It kind of gives me a sunset vibe," Max spread his arms, indicating the room as a whole.

"Yeah, it does. At least to my untrained eye. Iz seen it yet?" Michael wandered into the kitchen and grabbed a beer.

"Make yourself at home, why don't you?"

"Thought I was already," Michael dropped onto the couch in a loose-limbed sprawl, grinning at Max's eye roll.

"I was going to say Izzy hadn't seen it yet but there she is, right behind you."

"Are we having a meeting?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but I guess I should get used to having people here all the time." Max didn't look thrilled at the idea.

"Isobel and I aren't people. Relax."

"We are so," Isobel declared, sailing into the room. She then proceeded to ignore them while she inspected the windows.

"You're pod people," Max told Michael with a half smile.

"You're quoting Valenti now? The world really is gonna end."

"He's not so bad, as an adult," Max admitted.

His smile had become bashful and Michael's eyebrows rose sharply. "Max, please don't tell me the look on your face right now is because you've fallen for Kyle Valenti."

"What? No! No. I just, I'm not worrying about him anymore, that's all," Max rejected the entire concept.

Isobel abandoned her inspection to join them. "That look? Oh, that look is because he's spending his down time with Liiiiiz."

"O-ho! Progress, huh?" Michael's smile held genuine warmth.

"Yeah. I can't believe that after all these years, I can actually, like, kiss her hello. And goodbye. And, you know, in between those," he laughed softly, eyes shining.

Michael raised his beer. "Congratulations, man."

"I'm keeping a toothbrush on me at all times for when it feels like my teeth might rot," Isobel's tone was lofty but her smile was pure affection.
"So, what's the verdict on the new look?" Max asked her.

"It'll do. Much, much better than the grey would have been!"

"Agreed," Michael nodded. He heard the crunch of gravel and craned to see outside. "Maybe we are having an impromptu meeting. To check out your new décor."

"Speak of the devil and he appears," Isobel identified the arrival. "I think he's on call still but let me check."

Michael shared a look with Max; of course Isobel had Kyle's up-to-date work schedule on her phone. Along with everyone else's.

"Should I be expecting more? While you've got it open," Max enquired.

"I already know Noah has a late night planned, prepping for court tomorrow, so let's see. Alex should be off within the hour, and Liz ---"

"Is doing something with Maria tonight," Max interjected. He looked at Michael. "Do you want to text Alex?"

"It's your house, man, you invite him," Michael told him in a tone that suggested Max should already know that.

"Okay, I just thought... Fine," Max rolled his eyes as Michael continued giving him a look that reinforced the tone of his speech.

"I'm gonna go see what's taking Valenti so long," Michael announced. He drained his beer and left the empty bottle on the coffee table, to be collected later.

Restlessness pulsed through Michael as he strode out the door. Vehicle was there, but no human. "Kyle?" he called.

"Around the side, be there in a sec."

He emerged soon after and nodded in greeting. "I actually really like it."

"Same. And Isobel doesn't hate it so we're all safe," Michael chuckled.

"Oh good," Kyle echoed the laugh. "I guess none of us is patient, huh?"

"Guess not. Liz and Noah are busy - separately - and Max is seeing about Alex, so there might be one more tonight," Michael shrugged.

"Max is?"

"Yeahhh, it's his house," Michael said like that should have been obvious.

"Well yeah, but... I thought Alex was your..." he trailed off.

"Friend, is the word you're looking for, Kyle."

"Ah. Holding pattern on all fronts," Kyle's expression showed his understanding. He squeezed Michael's shoulder. "You coming inside?"

"In a minute," Michael flashed a brief smile, grateful that no explanation was required and no
questions were forthcoming. Kyle wasn't going to get on his case like Max or Isobel would have.

"Alright. See you in a few."

Michael scuffed his feet across the gravel. The sound it made, scraping against his boots as he walked, suited his mood. Without making a conscious decision, he began to etch out a shape in the dirt, a central triangle connected to three circles by a line extending from each point. He used a boot heel to shade in shapes within each circle and then stood back, regarding the image as a whole.

He knew it, sort of. Max's doodle tattoo. But Michael couldn't shake the feeling he'd seen it somewhere else, recently, in a format closer to this picture made from the desert floor. The shape of it had always felt like a tickle to his mind. A barely there knock on a door he didn't know how to open.

"You want cheese on your burger?" Max stuck his head out the door and Michael nodded. "Okay, I'm going to put the grill on in 15 minutes. Alex said not to wait for him, he'll be a good hour."

Michael lifted one hand in a thumbs-up gesture which Max returned before disappearing into the house.

Pacing around the image, Michael studied it a little longer, but no insights were forthcoming. He sighed and scuffed over the lines, erasing the drawing altogether.

He'd never seen a similar symbol in any book or online image search. He'd read enough about symbology and religious iconography, however, to know that he was a lot more comfortable not leaving random images loose in the world, even if he felt silly or mildly superstitious about it.

Once the dirt and gravel were simply dirt and gravel again, he went to join the group.

[end chapter twenty-seven]
Headbanging

Chapter Notes

The reason for the chapter title will become clear by the end of it. ;+)
~Tas

* * * * *

Alex had made it in time for ice cream. They were all finishing up now, quiet aside from the tap of spoons on bowls and the crackling of the logs recently added to the firepit.

Oranges, pinks, and purples still streaked the horizon as the sky overhead deepened, pinpricks of light unveiling in the growing darkness; glittering radiance scattered across the sumptuous velvet of the cosmos.

Isobel broke the silence with a reverent sigh. "I love New Mexico."

Alex smiled at her. "It's something special, yeah. I've watched the sun set in a few deserts and there's nothing quite like here."

"Bet you were better prepared than most for the temperature contrasts," Max opined.

"Yeah," Alex chuckled. "People expect the daytime heat but the chilly nights can be an unpleasant surprise."

"Constellations in different places. That's what threw me in Michigan. The weather wasn't such a shock until winter hit. I did not enjoy trudging to class in the snow," Kyle complained.

"I read about lake effect snow and the other unique weather patterns that happen around the Great Lakes. It's fascinating," Max smiled.

"Of course you did," Michael teased. Max just rolled his eyes.

"Speaking of elsewhere in the world, here you go, Iz, before I forget," Alex pulled a small ziplock bag from his jacket pocket and passed it to her.

"Ooooo, what's this?"

She sounded so excited, Alex had to laugh. "Buddy of mine is stationed in Japan and sent me some candy. All different fruit flavours, so there's a couple of each there."

"Thank you!" Isobel unzipped the bag and took out a wrapped candy. "Oh, they're squishy! I have to eat one now, ice cream be damned." She popped it in her mouth and closed her eyes, obviously concentrating.

Alex could tell from the way her lips pursed she'd gotten one of the more sour flavours and he laughed again. "Good?"

"Mm, I like those. Might be your best snack offering yet, Alex," she giggled.
"Duly noted. I'll ask her to send more."

"That's sweet of you, thank you."

Michael watched as they continued to talk, favourite candy and far-flung places, drawing Max and Kyle into the conversation. What had started as an offhand remark had solidified into a new tradition of Alex bringing Isobel a small treat whenever he saw her. Michael was certain the way Isobel lit up every time served as its own reward but he was grateful for it, too.

In fact, it made his heart hurt, seeing them interact with the same kind of familial affection he'd observed between Max and Noah. Because it felt good, and right, and also totally false because Noah was married to Isobel while Alex was Michael's friend. No different to Isobel in Alex's eyes these days.

Michael knew that wasn't exactly true either, or fair, but he felt the way he felt. And he didn't want to think about it anymore or analyse it or talk about his goddamned feelings. He needed to do something.

It drew all eyes when he stood up abruptly. "Gimme your bowls."

Max looked surprised. "You're going to do the dishes."

"A+ on that exam, Max. Bowl." He collected everything and stalked inside.

Alex found the others all looking at him. He spread his hands and shrugged. "He's not said anything to me."

Isobel rolled her eyes. "He's just in one of his moods. Probably an equation didn't give him the answer he wanted it to."

"And there's no point in asking because he'll explain it to you at the highest level possible so you don't have a clue what he's said," Max sighed. "But, that's Michael for you."

Alex was about to defer to their years of experience when he caught Kyle's raised eyebrow. Kyle darted his gaze towards the house with an encouraging look, clearly indicating his opinion of what Alex should do. He widened his own eyes in question and Kyle's expression became more insistent.

"I'll go see if he wants help," Alex spoke as he stood up. He didn't know why he was following Michael into the house to wash dishes from a meal he didn't even eat, really, but he was. No point having a wingman if you weren't going to act on his advice.

"Hey. You want any...." he trailed off as the kitchen came into full view. The dishcloth merrily scrubbed away at a plate that seemingly lifted itself out of the soapy water in the sink, while Michael leaned against the cupboards opposite, his back visible through the cut-out, a glass of something amber in his otherwise unoccupied hand.

At the voice, Michael shifted enough to smirk at Alex over his shoulder. "I got it under control, Manes."

"So I see." He watched the clean plate dunk itself in the clear rinse water and settle into the drying rack. "Shall I dry, then?"

"Nah, if you get in there it'll mess up the relative positioning and I might break something. You can dry once I've washed everything if you feel the need to contribute."
The comment was neutral, the tone friendly enough, but Alex detected an undercurrent he couldn’t identify yet. *Good call, Kyle.*

Alex took a seat at the breakfast bar. He was ambivalent about having the bar in between them, but he needed to sit and it was probably just as well if Michael weren’t in touching distance. "Got another one of those?" he indicated the drink. "Minus the acetone chaser."

"Obviously." Michael put his alien version of a mixed drink down and got out another glass. "You want ice, water, mixer, or straight up?"

"Ice, please." Alex preferred his liquor cold.

"Coming up." His movements spoke of long practice and Alex was torn between finding it worrying and finding it hot.

He smiled when Michael set the drink in front of him. "Thanks."

"No problem."

The dishes were still moving smoothly through the assembly line behind Michael; Alex was impressed. "I see what you mean about relative positioning. You don't even look like you're paying attention to those."

"I am, but yeah, it doesn't require heavy focus. I know Max's house reasonably well so I can move through the space mentally without too much trouble. The Airstream, I know like the back of my hand, so I could probably recalculate around you on the fly there," Michael mused, considering the possibility. It engaged the math and physics part of his brain sufficiently to distract him from the fact that Alex hadn't been in the trailer at all in weeks, never mind staying long enough for a meal and cleanup.

"Something else to test out," Alex nodded. Michael had clearly been keeping up his intake of nail polish remover, because he didn't look the least bit nauseated from the dishwashing, which was a more sustained effort than what he'd been practicing in the woods behind the cabin the past few weeks. Those tended more to short bursts of power.

More explosive, less domestic, out there. Alex admitted to himself that the domesticity appealed to him. He could imagine, all too easily, Michael washing dishes like this in the cabin, while Alex tried to distract him with kisses. He didn't have heirloom crockery or anything; it wouldn't bother him if Michael broke a few things.

Alex looked up at Michael, expecting to meet his eyes, flirt wordlessly, like they so often did, although they'd only kissed a couple of times since the night he'd started to hack into Project Shepherd, keeping it mostly platonic as they got to know each other better. But Michael was staring off into the distance, his face blank.

"Hey. Everything okay?" Alex asked quietly, keeping his gaze on Michael's face, hoping for nonverbal hints if Michael didn't say anything meaningful.

"Yeah," Michael answered, but it didn't sound convincing even to his own ears. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "I'm just in a shit mood, Alex. It's nothing to write home about."

"That's not a colloquialism I expected to hear from you, given everything," Alex smiled.

Michael gave him a quick, sarcastic glance and a crooked smile. "No? I've basically spent my life trying to phone home, so it seems apropos to me."
"Hadn't thought of it like that but yeah, touché." Maybe Isobel had been right about the failed equation thing after all.

"Yeah." Michael took a long swallow of his drink. Over the soap and the lingering scents from dinner, he could smell Alex. He wanted to press his face against the long column of Alex's throat and inhale deeply. Dust the tender skin with kisses. Lick a line from the sweet hollow at the base, up over the bulge of Adam's apple, the stubbled chin, to stop at that wicked, beautiful mouth.

Michael wanted to touch so badly that merely smelling Alex from three feet away was making his head spin, and he sighed. "Look, I'm not good company tonight. Why don't you go back to the fire with your other friends and I'll finish up in here?"

What the hell? Alex rose, moving around the bar to stand in front of Michael. "What do you mean, my other friends?"

Michael clenched his jaw. Coming closer had not been the intended effect of his suggestion. He didn't know why what he'd said needed clarification, but he provided it anyway. "Yeah, you know, Max, Isobel, and Kyle? The people who are here other than me?"

Alex just looked at him, trying to make the words make sense. Had Michael decided he didn't want a relationship anymore? His hand went to the pendant under his shirt, feeling its shape beneath the fabric, seeking reassurance.

The gesture had become familiar to Michael but he didn't get it, and with the lack of verbal response from Alex, he kept talking, "I don't know why you've taken to petting your own chest but whatever. You don't have to tell me, I got the message, okay? It's obvious you've made your decision and you don't want anything beyond friendship. I mean, this," he pointed at Alex then himself, "this is the closest you've been to me in like three weeks, so. Like I said, obvious." Man, he hoped Alex took the out gracefully and didn't try to explain himself, because having him right there was starting to really hurt.

Blinking rapidly, Alex tried to follow the logic in the utter nonsense coming out of Michael's mouth. It wasn't until he mentioned the recent physical distance that it started to click. Alex had been keeping extra space lately. But his reasoning had been the polar opposite of Michael's assumptions. Not because Alex didn't want to touch; because he no longer trusted himself to not touch if Michael were in reach.

How had they managed to cross wires this badly when they were talking to each other almost every damn day?

After a couple of false starts, Alex sputtered, "Are you fucking kidding me? I've been trying not to pressure you into something that I didn't know if you were ready for."

"I told you I loved you, what the hell else did you want? An engraved invitation?"

"You were pulling away, and I was trying to respect that!"

"Because I didn't want to pressure you into anything! I know I can come on strong, especially with you, and I finally realised that was part of the pattern, that once we got going I pushed us into so much momentum we kept going way past your comfort zone and you had to back off. And I didn't want to do it again," Michael managed to stay below shouting volume, if only just.

Alex stood there, breathing heavily, while Michael's words sank in. Overcorrection on both sides.
Both trying so hard not to hurt each other by pushing forward that they'd connected viciously on the back swing.

Michael's throat closed at the frozen silence and he swallowed. "I am really fucking confused about what's going on. Or was going on. Or should be. Whatever." His voice dropped low, shakier than he'd like. "All I know is, what I want hasn't changed. How I feel hasn't changed. But I don't understand what I'm supposed to be doing about it now."

"Put the dishes down," Alex found himself saying.

"What?"

"Put. The dishes. Down."

Michael glanced at the sink, surprised to find he'd proceeded on automatic pilot and almost everything was drip-drying on the rack. The pieces currently in motion, he lowered gently into the sink along with the cloth. Then he looked back at Alex, waiting for an answer.

From Alex's perspective, Michael looked braced for a blow, a feeling both of them were far too familiar with. Guilt slid through him but he brushed it aside; mistakes would happen. They would still bruise each other. The difference was, they'd tend each other's wounds and soothe each other's pain afterwards.

"Close your eyes, Guerin."

Michael's stomach churned at the request, nervous to the point of nausea, but he complied, lashes drifting down to rest on his cheeks.

Alex exhaled forcefully and stepped forward. He raised both hands, palms fitting perfectly on the prominent bones below those gorgeous long eyelashes, and brought his mouth to Michael's, kissing him with infinite tenderness. Slow and sweet, letting the gentle rhythm deepen as he pressed against Michael, chest to chest, hips to hips. He smiled into the kiss as Michael's hands touched his back, tentative at first then eager, using the hold to haul Alex as close as possible.

This was what Michael had been craving. He interacted with the world on a physical level, kinetic inside and out, and the affection in Alex's hands and lips, the warmth of his body, had been sorely needed. Michael released a whimper that was half sigh and all contentment.

Alex chuckled and finally pulled back, pressing his forehead to Michael's. "Better?"

Michael licked his lips, breathing unevenly. He opened his eyes to find Alex already looking at him. "I... Are we...?" he couldn't finish the question, unable to shake loose his fear of the answer.

"Together? Yes," Alex reassured, certain now it was what they both wanted. He scrunched up his face. "Boyfriends, I guess? Can you live with it if I introduce you as my boyfriend?"

"Hell yeah," Michael agreed fervently, and pulled Alex into another kiss.

[end chapter twenty-eight]
Michael had no idea how long they stood in the kitchen trading kisses. Every brush of Alex's mouth settled into him, relaxing him in slow degrees until it seemed like the cupboards behind him and Alex in front of him were all that kept Michael upright.

"You feel pretty boneless now," Alex murmured, then uttered a low laugh. "Well, most of you."

"Mm," Michael sighed. "I needed that."

It didn't sound like a facetious comment to Alex, more a simple truth. "The kissing or the holding part?"

"Both, but the need is probably the holding," Michael admitted. "I need... Contact, I guess."

Alex couldn't help laughing. "So you want me to make contact with you? Does high school count as first contact, or...?"

"Okay, maybe not the best choice of words," he rolled his eyes but also smiled. "You know what I meant."

"I think so. You need me to be hands-on with you, a lot. Not necessarily in a sexual way; it's about touch, in a general sense. Yes?"

"That sounds right," Michael agreed. "Although if you tell anyone else it isn't about sex, I may have to kill you."

"You're safe with me," Alex told him and it felt like a promise.

"Everything but my virtue," Michael teased, and they both laughed.

"Does this mean I can activate the 'Brother's Boyfriend' label on Alex's calendar?" Isobel's voice broke the spell.

Michael tensed, wary of Alex's potential reaction. After all, it hadn't gone well when Isobel had nearly interrupted them before. Granted, this time everyone had their pants on, but still.

Alex took a deep breath and turned to face Isobel. He kept Michael's arms around his waist, placing his own hands on top of Michael's. The whole group had been treating them like they were already a couple and that eased his nerves a lot. He gave Isobel a Very Serious look and enquired, "What
"Colour is the label?"

"Khaki, duh," she rolled her eyes, playing along, and Alex laughed.

"Go on, then, yeah. You do realise my name is shorter than either of those words?"

"Yes, but I like my organisational system, thank you."

"It's your calendar."

"Yes it is," and the permission pleased her, Michael could tell. He stayed still, holding onto Alex, not quite believing he was allowed but unwilling to let go until he was told.

"Anyway, what I actually came to talk to you guys about is, Noah texted and he'll be having an office couch night, so I was thinking, maybe we could try again to jog my memory? Since we're all here?" she looked hopeful and nervous simultaneously.

"Yeah, I mean, this is my Friday night, so it's a good time for me," Alex nodded.

"Fine by me," Michael agreed. "Let's leave Max out of it, though. He's such a fucking mother hen, it's hard to pay full attention to you."

"I'm sure Kyle can keep him occupied," she acknowledged.

Alex snickered. "Maybe they'll play gay chicken."

"Alex Manes! You did not just put that image in my head!" Isobel gasped, her face a picture of shocked disgust. "It's bad enough when Liz pops up in there!"

Michael felt much the same and groaned, "Oh God no." He had to move when Alex started laughing so hard he shook, unwrapping to let him breathe.

"Your face!" Alex wheezed. He leaned on both hands on the countertop. The twinge in his leg reminded him he needed a long sit soon, but he had to not suffocate first. Getting the runaway giggles under control, he added, "Oh man I wish I'd filmed that. It was epic."

Michael sighed. "Okay, while Chuckles here calms down, I'll do the last couple dishes and you can go tell the guys the plan."

Alex watched her leave, continuing to take deep breaths. Michael placed a hand on his back and Alex glanced at him, asking, "You alright?"

"Me?" Michael snorted. "I'm good, man. How about you?"

"Good, yeah." He straightened, turning in place. "You said before it was just Isobel and that wasn't true for me then, but it is now."

Michael nodded, enjoying the traces of laughter shining in dark eyes even as the conversation changed its nature. "I understand that now. And I know you're not... I mean, I'm not expecting PDAs, you know? Hands-on is in private."

"Thank you." Alex did press one more kiss to Michael's lips, appreciating the respect for his boundaries more than he could adequately say.

Michael ghosted a hand across Alex's cheek when they separated. "I'm gonna do these by hand." He picked up the dishcloth and got to work.
Michael paced as Isobel got comfortable on the bed in Max's guest room. Once she'd wiggled her way into a reclining position she liked, Alex sat on the edge of the bed, preparatory to stretching out beside her. Michael saw him wince.

"Leg?" Michael asked.

"Yeah. Too much standing." He flicked a soft look at Michael. "No regrets, though."

"I hear that," he smiled, a little giddy.

"Do you want to take it off? I don't mind waiting, and we're going to lie here anyway," Isobel patted the bedspread.

Alex sighed. "No, it's a whole production, and ---"

"I can undo it for you and slide it off. You won't even need to unbutton your jeans," Michael interrupted.

"You... Well. All right, then," Alex acquiesced. He'd let Michael help by hand before, and the display in the kitchen had certainly proved Michael had fine enough control of his powers. He shifted to lean against the wall, left foot on the floor, right leg outstretched on the bed.

"Just pretend I'm not here," Isobel closed her eyes tightly and put her hands over her ears.

Alex chuckled. He met Michael's gaze and nodded, signalling readiness. The first snick of the strap undoing itself was disconcerting but as it continued, he relaxed, appreciating the relief.

When the prosthesis was loose, Michael eased it forward until he could get a secure grip and then took over with his hands, setting it on top of the dresser. He reached into the jeans leg and pulled out the sock, too, laying it on the prosthesis. "Better?"

The echo of his own question from earlier made Alex smile. It wasn't so hard to let Michael take care of him when he was taking care of Michael in turn. "Much, yeah, thanks."

"Good." Michael tapped Isobel's foot. "It's safe now, Izzy, you can open your eyes."

She didn't say anything, just dropped her hands and looked at Alex as he slid up to lie on his side between Isobel and the wall.

"Ready?" Alex asked her, settling into position. This configuration had proved the most comfortable when trying to coax out Isobel's memories. The Q&A could last a while, especially since they hadn't had any real success. It was usually him who called timeout; Isobel often wanted to keep going.

"Let's do it," the brightness in her voice was faked but the bravery was real and Michael loved her for it. He watched as she closed her eyes again and her breathing slowed, syncing with Alex's.

Michael's role was mostly observation at this point. He'd been the one asking the questions at first, because he was the one who'd been there that night, who had witnessed what Isobel had done. But they'd tried this enough times that Alex had the sequence of events pretty much memorised and his manner was a lot more soothing than Michael's would ever be.

Alex started from the beginning, setting the clock back 10 years with a murmured narrative, putting Isobel's mind in another time and place. It had evolved into a mishmash of psychotherapy techniques
and hypnosis and whatever else had helped Isobel gain a clear picture.

Not that it had led anywhere new yet. Alex had guided her into achieving incredible clarity of her existing memories but the blank spots had remained stubbornly hidden.

Michael listened to them as the questions began. Alex's deep calm; Isobel's higher-pitched replies. Smooth together like coffee and cream.

Of course, Michael drank his coffee black, but he liked the analogy anyway.

Here they were, at the first block. Alex started with the same questions, feeling out the shape of the empty space, silently willing her mind to open. When Isobel groped for his hand, he let her grab and hold on. But he didn't stop the flow of words, even as she stuttered through incomplete, repetitive answers.

Until Alex felt searing desert heat envelop him, imbued with the scent of dust and human sweat. The vehicle under him rumbled and bounced along the rough excuse for a road. Through the passenger side window, Alex watched the clouds of sand kicked up by the vehicle in front of theirs, listening to the chatter from the back seat.

One moment, it was all normal. Outside Baghdad with his unit, driving back to base after a successful mission. Looking forward to a shower and a meal.

And the next, a sharp report, shredded rubber spewing from the wheel right in front of him as the Land Rover jerked and shuddered. His first thought was a burst tire. But the shreds were dripping red and there was something shining white sticking out of his shin at an angle his eyes refused to believe and in the hollow ringing that was all that was left of his hearing in the wake of the explosion, Alex realised he was screaming.

Michael knew something was wrong when they both went silent and their synchronised breathing jumped, obviously distressed. He knelt on the mattress and reached over Isobel to where she gripped Alex, prying their hands apart and holding each in his, squeezing. "Isobel. Alex."

When there was no response from either person, Michael crawled up in between them and pulled first Isobel, then Alex, against his sides. He could see the matching expressions now, unbearable agony writ large, and he realised that Isobel must have opened a connection and they were caught in a memory loop.

"Fuck." He'd never tried to break a connection he wasn't part of. Michael grabbed Isobel's shoulders and shook her vigorously. She whimpered but had no other reaction and he cursed again.

It had to be Alex's memory they were stuck in, and Michael had a pretty good idea as to what it was, with the way they both looked. He knew Alex had done a lot of mental work to deal with his injury while it would be brand new for Isobel. So it was Alex he needed to reach.

Michael shoved Isobel over to the side of the bed and shimmied down to lie flush with Alex and pull him close. He babbled whatever bullshit came to mind, that Alex was safe, in Roswell, healed, beautiful, loved. Punctuating his remarks with kisses, because he was damn sure those hadn't been part of the incident that had taken Alex's leg or its aftermath.

It worked, slowly, and Alex opened his eyes to find Michael right there, lips pressed to his cheek. "What - what're you doing?" He felt dazed, surprised to find himself in a bedroom rather than at base or in the hospital.

"Thank fuck," Michael exclaimed, pulling back to check his eyes. Definitely not all the way there yet
but Alex looked clear-headed enough. "I think Iz is trapped in your memory of your accident."

It came rushing back and Alex grimaced. "Shit. Yeah. I could have happily gone the rest of my days without reliving it that vividly." His brain was firing now and he pushed Michael away. "Help me get my jeans off."

"Excuse me?"

"If she's stuck where I think she is, the only thing I can imagine breaking her out is seeing the stump is fine." Alex shuddered as he popped open his fly. "A person is not meant to see their own bones."

That actually made sense and Michael helped Alex wriggle out of the denim and sit up, leaning against the wall, still breathing heavily.

"Move her over here," Alex pointed at his right knee, and Michael did, shifting Isobel over until her face was by Alex's truncated leg, and placed her hands on the healed end. She made a heartbroken sound and hugged the leg tight, laying her head on his knee.

"Maybe massage her calf and foot, you know, remind her physically they still exist," Alex suggested. His head thunked back against the wall. "Oh, man, I was not prepared for that."

"Me neither," Michael admitted, following his instructions. Isobel seemed to relax as he worked on her foot, though she still clung to Alex. But her breathing was becoming more normal.

Alex began to stroke Isobel's hair, hoping to contribute further towards the way she seemed to be calming down.

Michael looked over both of them, seeing the gradual return of equilibrium. He smirked at Alex. "You know, if you weren't gay and she weren't my sister and everyone weren't crying, this might be hot."

"Oh, Michael," came Isobel's voice, her utter disgust clear despite being muffled by her current position. He grinned; if she could be pissed at him, she was fine.

Alex just rolled his eyes. Michael was going to be Michael, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

[end chapter twenty-nine]
Alex pulled himself back against the pillows, grateful to be in his own bed. His phone was on the night table along with a bottle of water, and Michael was hovering near the door.

Serious déjá vu.

"Need anything else?" Michael asked. He was definitely sober enough to drive home, seeing as he'd already brought Alex here, but he wasn't sure how to navigate this part. A kiss goodnight, maybe? A promise to call in the morning? He'd never had a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend, for that matter. And with the two of them, Alex had always been the one to leave.

Alex regarded him, noting the body language. He was tired, and still a little shaken from his surround sound trip down memory lane, and Michael's hesitancy gave Alex the courage to be honest with himself and Michael. "You know what? Yeah. I need you to take your pants off and get in bed and hold me."

The blunt statement startled a laugh from Michael. "Doesn't get much clearer than that." He stripped to his boxers and slid under the covers, settling on his back with his arm outstretched towards Alex. It was fast enough that Michael didn't feel nervous until he was in place, waiting.

It was exactly what Alex wanted. He turned the light off and shifted closer, his head on Michael's shoulder, his bad leg thrown over two good ones. "Better than a pile of pillows."

Michael chuckled, curling his arm around Alex, hand coming to rest on his hip. The simple act of holding Alex like this soothed his apprehension. "Warmer, too." He pressed a kiss into dark hair. "I didn't know if you'd want me to stay."

"I didn't know either until you were here," Alex admitted. He drew circles on Michael's chest with a fingertip. "But you asked what I needed and right now, I need this. I need you."

"You have me."

The barest hint of dawn lightened the room when Michael awoke. He craned his neck to see Alex's face, his cheek still pressed to Michael's chest. The horizontal lines between those expressive brows had smoothed in sleep and a hint of a smile rested on that pretty mouth. Michael felt his heart catch at how exquisite Alex looked, unguarded and sweet in his arms.

Was Michael truly going to be allowed this?

He could happily stay right here and watch Alex sleep but nature called and Michael carefully disentangled himself, replacing his body's support points with pillows. He held his breath as Alex sniffled and shifted, but settled back down on the pillows without waking. Good.

Michael grabbed his jeans by the waistband, holding the belt buckle in place so it didn't clang, and quietly exited the bedroom. He was wide awake by the time he'd washed his hands so headed for the main house.

He texted Alex his whereabouts while the coffeemaker did its thing, knowing the phone was on
silent. The modern equivalent to a note left on the empty pillow.

Not that Michael had done that, either. In fact, last night had been the first no-sex sleepover in his life. He had occasionally stayed at the Evenses' house growing up, and they'd watch movies and eat popcorn sprawled in a heap that Isobel called a puppy pile, but that was totally different. Kid stuff.

Last night had been adult, if PG-rated. But the fact that Alex had trusted him to keep it PG, given their history, meant a lot to Michael.

Coffee in hand, he opted for the living room. The bookshelf stereo had cassette decks and Michael popped in a tape. He perused the books, finally picking one about North American wildlife, and curled up on the couch with a blanket over his bare feet.

It was surprisingly fascinating. Michael knew cows, horses, goats, sheep, chickens, dogs, cats. All the creatures found on a typical farm or ranch. He knew which local snakes, spiders, and insects were poisonous, and what desert flora was safe to eat. But he hadn't met any fauna from temperate forested areas or grassland prairies and the variations intrigued him.

He was still reading when the door swung open.

"Guerin. You doing repairs shirtless now?"

Michael's heart all but stopped at Maria's pointed question. Alex's Saturday morning delivery. Never mind that it was Tuesday. He'd forgotten, and apparently so had Alex.

"Uh, no. I'm not here to repair anything." He'd say it wasn't what it looked like, but it kinda was.

"I see." She glanced around the room. "No boots?"

"In the," he could chicken out here, draw out the explanation, or just own the truth. "In Alex's bedroom. Along with my shirt. I didn't want to wake him."

She pursed her lips, nodding. "A'right, well, no boots isn't going to save you from carrying shit. There more coffee?"

"Yes. It should be hot still." He put the book on the coffee table and stood up, waiting for her to get out of the doorway so he could go to her car.

Maria didn't move right away, looking him up and down blatantly. Michael was torn between flirting and folding in on himself. Finally she said, "I gotta admit, I wondered what the morning after might look like. Not bad, cowboy."

He laughed; that was firmer ground. Tipping his invisible hat to her, Michael drawled, "Thank you, ma'am."

She rolled her eyes but she did move, walking towards the kitchen, and Michael escaped into the sunlight.

He hoisted the second to last case of water and started for the house, coming to a dead halt when he saw Alex on the porch, fully dressed and freshly showered, it looked like. He didn't miss the contrast with his own semi-clothed, sweaty state but there wasn't much Michael could do about it right now. "Hi."

"Hi," Alex echoed, his gaze slipping over all that lovely exposed skin. The rounded bulge of flexed arms carrying the water. The low-slung denim held up by a heavy leather belt, metal buckle glinting.
The sheen over his torso, picking out the fairer of the hairs splashed liberally across his chest so they glinted, too.

"Alex," his voice was low, rough, not entirely steady. "Maria is inside. You need to not look at me like I'm breakfast if you want me to be able to go in the house."

"You're probably right," Alex conceded, but he neither moved nor abandoned his thorough visual inspection. Not until he could see a flush spreading over Michael's collarbone, a known sign of his arousal.

Then Alex offered him a cheeky smile and went through his open front door to find Maria.

"Fucking hell." Michael knew Alex could be a tease but surely that hadn't been called for, especially when he was doing the man a favour here. He took a few deep breaths and followed Alex.

Bending down, Alex kissed Maria's cheek hello. She'd gotten herself a beverage already and he went to do the same as Michael set the water down on the other cases.

"Care to explain this?" Maria enquired, waving at Michael.

Alex leaned against the counter and shrugged. "You have eyes. Do you really need more than that?"

Michael straightened and shot Alex a disbelieving look. "Dude!"

He watched Maria glance between them with an expression that expertly blended perplexity and perceptiveness. "There is something else going on here. You," she pointed at Alex, "are not that shallow. And you," her finger moved its aim towards Michael, "are not one to get offended when someone calls you hot. So, boys, who's going to tell me what's up? Besides Guerin," punctuating that parting shot with a deliberate glance at his groin. He groaned internally; busted.

Alex had a hard time keeping a straight face. Michael's stunned expression was priceless. He relented, though, pulling the resin pendant out from beneath his T-shirt. "This is what's going on, Maria."

"That's about Guerin?" she gasped and Alex nodded.

"What is that?" Michael frowned at what looked like a transparent bar of antique gold. "Is that why you keep petting yourself, because you've been wearing that? I was starting to wonder if you'd grown a third pec."

"Nope, just a necklace," Alex rolled his eyes. "Come here." He held the pendant out where Michael would be able to see it.

"Okay, it's resin with a piece of glass in it. It's cool - your work I assume?" he glanced at Maria, who nodded, then looked back at the pendant. "But I'm none the wiser about what it has to do with me, Manes."

"You broke the glass," Alex said simply, knowing Michael would catch on.

"That night at Max's? You rescued a piece?" He touched the resin, his fingertip tracing the shape trapped inside. The night he'd told Alex how he felt. What he wanted. What he needed from Alex to make it work for him.

And now Michael had that. All of it.
He swallowed, looking at Alex through his eyelashes. "I didn't know you'd taken a memento."

"Yeah. A reminder, really. I wanted to do right by you this time. By us. You know?" he said softly.

"You are," Michael breathed. He desperately wanted to kiss Alex for that, every bit of it, but they had an audience and this was already feeling like it might be too intimate for Alex to comfortably share. But his back was to Maria so Michael channelled it all into his eyes, locking gazes with Alex.

God, Alex could drown there, the strength of Michael's emotions radiating from him and washing over Alex. He was reminded again just how safe he felt with this man. It seemed contradictory, that the intense storm that was Michael Guerin could inspire such a sense of safety, but maybe it was because he held Alex in the eye of his personal hurricane, protected from the worst of it.

Maria cleared her throat loudly. "Alex. Sit down before I feel like any more of a voyeur."

Alex bit back the standard response of an apology. He wasn't sorry, and he didn't want Michael thinking he might be. "Yeah, Maria."

Michael let the pendant drop, his eyes crinkling as he smiled. "I got one more case of water to fetch and then I'll make omelettes, if you want. Maria, you in?"

"Sure. I can't do omelettes, I always end up with scrambled eggs, so it'd be a nice change. Didn't know you could cook, Guerin," she smiled.

He shrugged. "I have a small repertoire of meals I'm good at. Omelettes are one of them. It's a pattern thing, the eggs have to look a certain way, behave a certain way, before you do the next bit." It was as good an explanation as he could offer, and when Maria nodded like she'd understood, Michael smiled and went back out to the car.

Alex took a seat before she could tell him again and deflected what he was sure would be the first question. "So, you've met my boyfriend, as of yesterday. In decision time slap a name on it terms."

"No more fear?"

He huffed a laugh. "I wouldn't go that far, but it isn't an obstacle anymore. Or I'm more afraid of losing him than I am of anything else. Including my father."

"He's different with you. Less prickly."

"Oh, he's plenty prickly still. Just, he trusts me. And I trust him."

She sat back and looked at him for a long time. Alex let her. He wasn't hiding anything, not about his feelings for Michael, anyway. Maria smiled. "Happy looks good on you, Alex."

He smiled back, but didn't reply as Michael re-entered with the water. Alex couldn't help but watch him deposit the case, appreciating the lean lines of muscle in his back. Then he jerked as his prosthetic leg moved on its own.

"Ow, fuck!" Maria exclaimed. He realised she must have kicked him.

"Why are you trying to bruise your foot on my fake leg, Maria?"

"I thought I was kicking the other one," she hissed. "Because you were getting pornographic with your face."

Michael grinned. Alex had the grace to look apologetic, but Michael couldn't resist commenting,
"Hey, I've been getting objectified all morning. Why stop now?"

"Ugh, don't encourage his ego," Maria told Alex, and he laughed, looking at Michael.

"Thought you were making breakfast?" he raised his eyebrows.

"Yep. DeLuca, cheese and mushrooms okay?"

"Blissfully so."

"Awesome." He started to pull out everything he needed, paying attention to the task at hand.

Alex watched him for a couple minutes before looking back to Maria, to find her giving him a soft smile. He shrugged and she laughed.

"So does Guerin give you Museum Guy face because he's your boyfriend?"

"Yes. And no," Alex hedged. He sighed; time to confess. "It's also because he is Museum Guy."

"Get out of town! Good Lord, Alex. You've been stringing him along since high school? No wonder you wanted a reminder to not fuck it up this time."

Alex winced. "Well, not continuously, it was..." he trailed off at her stern look. "Yeah. Okay? I did. I didn't mean to, but I did." He sighed. "You do know how to cut through my bullshit, Maria. Sometimes I hate you for that."

"Bullshit again, Alex Manes. You love me for it."

"Well, yeah, that too. Obviously," he chuckled.

Being discussed literally behind his back, within earshot, was new to Michael. So was any consensus that someone's treatment of him hadn't been good. He could hear Alex taking responsibility for the push-pull nature of their past and it felt strange to have Maria agreeing, seeming to believe that Michael had deserved better. As his bartender, she knew him well enough that it surprised him when she chastised Alex.

Michael remained quiet, though, simply listening, until he plated the food and brought it to the table.

"Here you go."

"Now that's what I call an omelette!" Maria exclaimed, immediately digging out her phone.

"What are you doing?" Michael frowned as she snapped a photo.

"Instagramming my breakfast. Can't not share it. It's so pretty!"

"O-kay." Michael left her to it. As long as she didn't want a picture of the chef too, it was her business if she was being weird. He didn't think a mushroom omelette topped with melted cheese was particularly pretty, but whatever. It tasted good, that's all Michael cared about.

He exchanged a look with Alex and they both shrugged. Maria would be Maria.

Alex thought it was cute, but he kept that to himself; saying it aloud would bring out that prickliness in Michael. He started eating instead.

Maria continued to enthuse and Michael mostly tuned her out after thanking her. It was only an impressive feat because as she'd admitted, she couldn't do it herself. Someone else finding it easy to
do something you can't is usually impressive, out of all proportion to the actual difficulty of the thing.

He tuned back in when Maria asked him, "So is this why I haven't seen much of you lately, and why you've been leaving alone when you do show up?"

"I've been busy, too, but, yeah. Pretty much," Michael confirmed, keeping his eyes on his plate.

That, Alex hadn't known, and he slotted it together with the new knowledge of Michael's need to be touched. No wonder Michael had gotten so twisted up. Alex had been determinedly hands-off and nobody else had been filling the void.

"Or did you hit the gay bar to pick up men? I think there's still one at the edge of town," Maria wrinkled her nose, trying to remember.

"Oh God no, Maria, that place is a cesspool. You have to go to Santa Fe or Albuquerque for anywhere decent," Alex rejected the local bar.

"Oh, well, how would I know? I'm not a guy," Maria shrugged.

The idea had occurred to Michael a number of times over the years. He wasn't much of a dancer but he'd figured he could still have a really good night. Except he'd never quite made it there. Local or otherwise.

"Nah, I'm loyal to the Pony, DeLuca," he drawled. "Nowhere else has a bartender with your charm."

She laughed, as he'd intended.

Alex noticed the way Michael had sidestepped the question and made a mental note to talk to him about it later. It wasn't really any of Maria's business who Michael had been sleeping with, but it was Alex's now.

"Obviously, I had better not see you leaving with anyone who isn't Alex from now on," her tone was light with a backbone of steel.

Michael just laughed and leaned back in his chair, smirking at her. "Really, DeLuca? I'm many things, and most of them aren't good, but I'm no cheater. I'm a one man band, believe me."

Alex had rolled his eyes at the threat but Michael's reply caught at him. Was that truly what he thought of himself? Maria seemed satisfied with it, at least.

"Well, thank you, Michael, for a very nice omelette, and for putting a smile on your boyfriend's face. I appreciate both," Maria smiled.

"Any time, DeLuca, any time," Michael flirted back, and Maria stood up, clearly getting ready to leave.

Something had been percolating in Alex's mind for weeks now and he found himself asking, "Are you busy today? Do you have time to stay for a while longer? Like, a few hours, maybe?"

"Alex," Michael gritted out between his teeth. Maria ignored him and regarded Alex.

"Do you want me to clear my schedule for today? I can, if necessary."

"Yes, please," Alex nodded.

"Max is gonna kill you," Michael said in a near sing-song.
"No, he won't. Among other reasons, this is something Liz and I have been talking about doing for a while."

Michael let out an explosive sigh. "You're right. Max is going to want to kill you, and then Liz will send him to sit in the corner, and he'll go, and stay there until she tells him he's allowed out."

Maria sat back down, looking back and forth between them. "You're more like your brother than I thought."

"Ha ha," Michael wasn't amused. He glanced at Alex, who nodded encouragingly, and sighed. "Besides, Max can't do this."

He concentrated and the coffee pot floated over to pour a neat refill into Maria's mug, then floated back to its original location. It was a toss-up whether he enjoyed Maria's shock or Alex's pride more.

Michael stood up and took an extravagant bow. "Michael Guerin, telekinetic alien, at your service."

[end chapter thirty]
"Let me get this straight. You want me to help you hypnotise Isobel Evans. An honest to God alien. So she can access the supposedly suppressed memories of her killing Rosa Ortecho. Because someone or something else was controlling her body at the time, and the same something may also have caused her recent blackout, and could have infected Wyatt Long and made him try to kill Liz a couple months ago. Meaning the thing isn't gone. Does that about sum it up?"

"Yeah," Alex nodded, exchanging a glance with Michael. That was a lot more succinct and organised than the explanations they'd given her to arrive at that summary.

"And you're only telling me this now, why?"

Alex recognised the too-calm tone as a potential harbinger of fury. Maria's emotions were usually fairly transparent, at least to those who knew her, but she rarely got angry. Irritated, annoyed, exasperated, yes, often. Genuine rage, Alex had only seen a few times during their long friendship.

Michael spoke up. "We talked about bringing you in a while ago, when we weren't having any luck with Isobel's memories. Alex said he was using some stuff he'd learned from you, and he and Liz weren't happy about lying to you, either. I thought it would be okay. Izzy didn't like it at first but she's frustrated enough that she agreed. And then Max said no," he shrugged, a long-suffering look on his face.

"So four of you wanted to but that went out the window because Max choked? What kind of democracy is that?"

"The kind that's actually a dictatorship," Michael drawled.

That garnered a laugh from Maria and Alex relaxed a little.

"So what changed?" she wanted to know. "Max's mind obviously hasn't or Guerin wouldn't think he'll be upset."

"Iz and I tried it again last night and it kind of went sideways," Alex admitted. "Best I can figure is, one or both of us was thinking about my leg, because I'd just taken off the prosthesis, and Isobel made a connection between us without meaning to, and next thing I knew, I was back in Iraq, reliving the second worst memory of my life." He gave his shoulders a good shake. "It was so real, Maria. I could smell the sand, the other people in the car, and then blood. My blood."

She didn't say anything when Alex paused, simply placing a hand on his arm and squeezing.

"Anyway, we got caught in a feedback loop or whatever. Guerin broke me out and then we got Izzy
out together. But," he shook his head, "I knew it was a memory, right? Like, that five minutes is something I've had to go over and over and over since it happened. It was new for her, though, and obviously overwhelming."

"I would think so," Maria agreed. She sighed. "I can't say I'm happy about the prospect of touching Regina George's mind, but...."

"Thank you, Maria," Alex gave her a spontaneous hug and she ruffled his hair.

"So how are you going to break the news to Max?" she asked.

"Oh, I'll do that," Michael smirked. "He's usually got a bone to pick with me anyway, won't matter if I add to my pile of wrongdoings."

"I made the decision, Guerin, I should," Alex began, subsiding when Michael shook his head.

"Alex, man, if I'd actually said no, don't tell Maria, you would have respected it. I didn't. And you knew everyone but Max was in favour, so as I see it, the decision had already been made." He winked, "You were just the one who had the balls to say it."

"That's you told," Maria nudged Alex and he laughed.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I gotta admit, DeLuca, I thought you'd freak out more, but you're rolling right with it," Michael complimented.

"Well, I have a unique perspective, Guerin - and not because I'm weird," she shot him a quelling look and he grinned. "Because I'm black. Alex, do you remember when we were little?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "You thought you and your mom were the only black people on the planet."

"Right. And that obviously isn't true, but we were the only ones in Roswell and that had a big effect on me, growing up. My differences are visible and yours aren't," she gestured at Michael. "But I do know a bit about how it feels to be so totally alone in those differences, and how you can think differently because of it."

"I came to a similar understanding from experiencing life in a war zone," Alex added to her concept. "I don't know if it would have made sense to me before that. But the way your views constrict in some ways and expand in others, yeah. It changes how you process information."

Michael was surprised anew by the comprehension and empathy they displayed towards him and his siblings. He fiddled with the empty mug in front of him on the table, letting them talk.

"Now that's out of the way, Alex, what the hell, second worst memory? What was worse than getting your leg blown off?" Maria demanded.

Alex's gaze shifted to Michael's hands before he consciously decided whether to answer her, and he knew she'd followed him.

"Guerin's hand? What's that got to do with you?"

Michael looked up at her words, finding Alex gazing at his hands. He spread the fingers of the busted left as best he could. "This? Alex, no. This wasn't your fault."

"Oh, no? I offered you sanctuary and then got you assaulted."
"No," Michael stated forcefully. "I was assaulted, yeah. Your dad got six strikes in before I managed to pull loose. But then he dropped the bloody hammer and walked out." His jaw clenched and he had to clear his throat to continue. "If he'd've started in on you? He wouldn't have stopped, Alex. Until after you'd stopped breathing. That was murder in his eyes. So yeah, I stepped in and I got hammered. Literally. But the both of us are still alive."

Alex couldn't stop shaking his head, denying Michael's version of events. "It should have been me. I was used to it, I knew how to take it."

"What, and I didn't? You know I did. That's why you made the offer in the first place, when I borrowed your guitar. I never had to say it; you knew why I'd skipped out of foster care."

That was true, undeniably so. Well, most of it. A tiny smile appeared and Alex corrected, "Stole."

"Borrowed, Manes. I did not abscond with your instrument," Michael teased gently, relieved that Alex seemed to understand what he was saying.

Alex shrugged, the smile widening. "Fine. Borrowed."

"Damn right."

Maria broke the resulting silence. "That's why you ran off and enlisted, after six years of swearing up and down you would never join the military."

"It is, yeah."

She nodded, pursing her lips. "Uh-huh. All I can say is, Jesse Manes better hope he never meets me in a dark alley. Because nobody would be able to find the pieces."

Michael raised an eyebrow at her fierce tone. "This might be the first time you've genuinely scared me, DeLuca."

Her smile wasn't any gentler. "Be glad it's on your behalf and not in your direction, Guerin."

"Oh, I am."

"All right then. Shall we try this on Alex's next Saturday? I can't be out today and tomorrow both, but I can make arrangements for then. Guerin, I assume you can do the same?" Maria checked.

"Yeah, that'll work for me. Gives me time to get Isobel ready, too."

"Is it wrong of me to hope she gets another nosebleed?" Michael gave her a dirty look and she laughed. "Kidding. Mostly."

"I'll make sure there's kleenex available," Alex rolled his eyes. "God knows we both ended up in tears yesterday."

"Which brings us back to your leg, Alex."

"It does? Why, do you want to kick me again?" he batted his eyelashes at her.

"No, but if you keep that up, I will kick you and it won't be in the leg," Maria retorted.

"Whoa, feet off the goods, DeLuca," Michael objected.

"I'm not going to hurt him, you doofus. He's one of my best friends," she rolled her eyes, then stood
and moved a chair behind Alex. "Turn around and put your leg up here."

"All right," Alex acquiesced, no clearer on what he was doing but willing to play along.

"Guerin, come here."

Michael shrugged and complied, coming to stand beside Alex's outstretched leg. "Now what?"

"Now, on the floor, Guerin," she pointed at the target spot.

He gave her a doubtful look. "We're not gonna put on some kind of kinky sex show for you, DeLuca."

"Obviously." Maria swatted his arm. "Knees."

Michael grumbled but he sank to the floor and looked up at her expectantly. There had to be some plan here because Maria was very sure of herself but he'd be damned if he could figure it out.

He let her take his left hand and place it on Alex's knee.

"Maria, what are you doing?" Alex finally asked. This was bordering on uncomfortable for him.

"It's okay," she reassured, and knelt on the opposite side of Alex's leg. Then she covered the place where they joined with both her hands and looked between them. "This is what I call a karmic circle."

"And that is, what, exactly?" Michael asked.

"This was the first injury," she tapped the back of Michael's hand. "It happened because Alex was in danger, and Michael acted to protect him."

"Right," Michael extended the vowel, sounding skeptical even as he agreed. Maria only used his first name when she was being serious, though, so when she lifted an eyebrow at him, he nodded and fell silent.

"This," she tapped on Alex's upper calf, "this was the second injury. Ultimately, it happened because Michael was in danger, and Alex acted to protect him."

"How do you fig ---" Michael stopped mid-sentence when Maria glared at him. He held up his free hand and nodded an apology.

"It's a fair question, though, Maria," Alex said quietly.

"It's also one you know the answer to. You enlisted to make sure your father didn't go after Michael. You went on three overseas deployments and the final one saw you injured. Not an inevitable outcome, by any means, but not a negligible risk, either. And thus, closing the circle."

"Guerin isn't responsible for me losing my leg, Maria, don't be ridiculous," Alex scoffed.

"No. But he feels as guilty about your leg as you feel about his hand."

Alex's gaze snapped to Michael, to find his eyes down and his shoulders curling forward in a defeated posture. He didn't need to ask if it were true; Michael's body language spoke volumes.

"But," he started, and left it hanging, because Alex really didn't know what else to say. It was absurd, feeling guilty about an incident that had happened in a war zone.
If that were truly the case, though... He'd told Kyle his father was his war. The tool shed had been Alex's escape from the house - from his personal war zone - but he knew people who'd been injured in supposed safe spaces overseas. Because war didn't respect boundaries. At all.

He looked back to Maria, finding her regarding him with a small smile and one lifted brow. "You're saying we're both wounded warriors and we should get over ourselves."

"The first part, yes. You both have battle scars, from events and circumstances outside either of your control. As for getting over yourselves, guilt doesn't resolve quite so easily. But, perhaps a new way to look at it could help?"

"Go on," Michael prompted softly, keeping his eyes on their hands on Alex's knee. He'd never considered the interpretation they were presenting and he wanted to know more.

Alex nodded, giving his silent agreement, and Maria smiled, squeezing his knee and Michael's hand.

"The two of you are building something here. You have a lot of history, far more than most, and that comes with its own challenges. And, everything comes with a price, right? This closed karmic circle, though, your complementary war wounds, could be described as paying that price. You've both lost something important to make way for gaining each other."

Michael rolled his shoulders, letting the words sit there, seeing how they felt on his skin, in his bones. He hadn't thought of his childhood as a war before. It made sense, intellectually. Emotionally, it was more difficult to pin down how he felt; it always was. Too much chaos.

But a barter system, Michael understood. It was why he didn't worry too much about running up a bar tab, because eventually something in the Wild Pony would need repairs and Maria would knock the cost off his tab.

"So, not get over ourselves, but move forward clean, like we've earned this?" Michael tried putting it out there, the taste of it strange in his mouth.

"You've got it," Maria praised gently and he raised his eyes finally to meet hers, seeing her encouraging smile. He wasn't used to this softer side of her. Michael tended to get the sharp side of Maria's tongue. Courted it, in truth, partly because she gave as good as she got and he fed on that energy.

This was a totally different type of energy. Equally strong, though. Becoming Alex's boyfriend seemed to have landed him in the same 'needs care and feeding' friends bucket where Alex lived.

"Does the high priestess need to impart any more wisdom, or can I get off the floor now?" Michael reverted to sass, relieved when she rolled her eyes without losing the smile.

"You have the patience of a flea, Guerin." Maria let go of them both and stood herself, brushing the knees of her jeans.

"My floor is clean, Maria, relax," Alex smiled. He'd stayed quiet, watching Michael struggle through a framing of their relationship that had made instant, instinctive sense to Alex. That he'd eventually deflected with sarcasm wasn't a surprise, only how long it had taken him to get to that point.

"A'right what this priestess actually needs is Alex's schedule once known, and to get back to her job."

"I'll text you soon as," Alex promised.
"Thank you, honey," she leaned down to give him a hug and Alex squeezed back hard.

"Guerin," Maria held out a hand and Michael shook it, assuming that was what he was supposed to do. She laughed and pulled him forward into a quick hug. "Doofus."

With that, she was gone, leaving a brightness lingering in the air.

Michael looked at Alex. "I feel like I've been adopted."

Alex laughed. "I think you may have been." He didn't miss the choice of words and wondered if Michael realised what he'd said in the larger context. Probably not and Alex wasn't going to mention it. He lifted his leg off the chair and set his fake foot down, patting his thighs. "C'mere."

Michael went easily, straddling Alex's lap. "We usually do this the other way around."

"That's because you have a bony ass."

"Whereas you," Michael brushed a kiss across his mouth, "have the most fantastic ass in the universe."

"Hardly," Alex laughed.

"Sh. My world-class view, my verdict," he insisted, kissing Alex properly now.

Alex let him, splaying his hands across Michael's back and pulling him close as they kissed. He spoke again when they reached a natural break point. "About sex."

Michael chuckled. "Let me guess: this is you wanting to talk about sex, not about moving this to the bedroom."

"Well, yeah. For now."

"It's okay," Michael reassured with another kiss. "I know we're not there yet. No rushing this time, right?"

"Right," Alex agreed, relieved.

Michael leaned back enough to see Alex's face and gave him a filthy grin. "And I'm clean. I test myself regularly, on a porn star schedule. Because it's more fun taking blood that way."

There was absolutely nothing Alex could do with that pronouncement except laugh. "It's about your ego, dude."

"Pfft," Michael shrugged.

He shook his head, chuckling. "I got it done the old-fashioned way, at a clinic, but I'm clean, too."

"Awesome. Can we make out now? Before you decide your thighs are tired of being bruised by my bony ass?"

Alex didn't answer with words.
[end chapter thirty-one]
Brotherly Love

* * * *

The one down side to Max's gussied-up windows was how difficult it was now to look into the house while standing outside. No other vehicles were in his driveway so Michael was going to have to hope Max was actually alone.

Although, if he did have Liz in there and they were getting up to something, it wouldn't be in the middle of the living room. Because it was Max.

And now Michael wished he'd just opened the fucking door instead of considering what he might see on the other side and having unwanted insights into his brother's sex life.

He walked in five seconds later, to find Max on the couch reading, so engrossed in the book that it wasn't until Michael waved a hand in front of his face that Max noticed he wasn't alone.

"Hey. You again?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "Missed you, too."

Max sighed and placed a worn bookmark in his novel, closing it neatly and putting it down. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"You gonna fold your hands, too? Put your best cop face on?"

His face did change, to an all too familiar weary resignation. "What did you do, Michael?"

Dropping into a chair, Michael smirked, "Spent the last few hours filling DeLuca in. On everything."

"What?" Max thundered.

Michael spread his hands, unrepentant. "It was time."

"We agreed ---"

"No, we didn't," Michael interrupted. "The consensus was that we should tell her. You vetoed it, all on your own. And I un-vetoed it today. With Alex."

"I should have known," Max sighed. "Was it his idea?"

"It was his idea in the first place, if you'll recall, and the rest of us thought it was a good one. But I broke the news today."

"Okay." He sighed again and folded his arms. "Okay. And what, pray tell, did you do for a demo?"

"Topped up her coffee. Without leaving the table," Michael shrugged.

Max chuckled, and did that thing where he shook his head slightly while rolling his eyes. Michael was pretty sure he'd never seen him do that for anyone else. Maybe Isobel.

"Isn't that the second time you've been at Alex's with Maria? Am I remembering that rightly? When you told him everything."
"Uh, yeah. You are correct. Amazingly, the same three people in the same kitchen drinking coffee and eating eggs on two separate occasions, can be two wildly different experiences. It was kinda weird."

"Good weird or bad weird?" Max enquired.

Michael blew a raspberry. "Just different. Like, DeLuca hugged me goodbye today, so, yeah. Weird."

"I assume that means you told her about you and Alex, too, if she's spontaneously hugging you."

"Yeah. There was some shorthand of the 20-year friendship variety. It was a little like watching you and Iz talk about something. But, I mean, she was the first person Alex came out to, so it's good that she seems okay with me." Michael was, however, conscious Maria's scary could be directed at him if he hurt Alex.

"Mm," Max said, non-committal.

"What?" That expression indicated thinking was happening and Michael wanted to know about it. Before it slid into full-on brooding.

"I have to admit, I was reconsidering my position this morning. Isobel was a real mess and I just, I can't do anything to help her with her memories and I hate it."

"Yeah, it wasn't exactly a good time for Alex, either, but it definitely hit Isobel harder." Michael understood disliking the feeling of helplessness. It wasn't something either of them handled well.

Max nodded. "That's the first time I've seen him with an empty pant leg and two crutches. I got the feeling he doesn't do it often."

"No. Not outside the house, anyway. He's... Stubbornly independent, I guess."

"Ah," Max chuckled. "Probably some epic head-butting in your future."

"Could be," Michael admitted with a smile.

Max looked at the floor, his shoulders rising in a tentative shrug. "He makes me uncomfortable sometimes."

Michael frowned. "Because he's disabled?"

"No, no," Max unfolded his arms and made a dismissive motion with one hand. "And not because he's gay, either. You know I don't care about that."

"Then...?"

"I don't know, exactly," his brow furrowed, clearly puzzled.

"Mm." Michael sat back and regarded Max intently. He had a good idea what the problem was, so he put it out there without any cushioning. "Maybe you don't like having your leadership challenged by someone who might actually be better at it than you are."

He watched Max's jaw work, the quick flash of anger chased by guilt, the clenched hand on his knee. Michael waited it out. In time, Max looked at him, smiling ruefully.

"Maybe, yeah." He sighed and looked heavenward. "How stupid is that? I should be relieved,
"Look, you've been doing it for 20 years. First with Isobel, and then I came back into town, and then you saved the love of your life. And then more people dropped in. So maybe, it's okay, if you like, share the mantle with a guy who's been professionally trained to do this shit." He leaned forward to pat Max's knee. "You know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah," Max nodded, relaxing. "Yeah, you're right. Which means Alex must be good if he's getting you to resemble a responsible adult."

"Hey!" Michael protested. He had to laugh, though. "Asshole."

Max just rolled his eyes. "You gonna stay a while? Want a beer?"

"Yeah, I'll take a beer, sure."

As Max went to the kitchen, Michael thought that Liz was having an even more profound effect on his brother. He hadn't expected to be able to stick around after imparting his news but here they were, about to have a drink together and hang out, for no particular reason.

It felt good.

[end chapter thirty-two]
The Gory Details

Chapter Notes

Chapter title has naught to do with actual gore. ;+D
~Tas

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

* * * * *

Alex slid into the booth beside Liz, greeting her with a hug. This was what Maria called the Third Date Booth, because it had one of those continuous semicircular bench seats and it was the most private one in the Pony, so often hosted couples who couldn't keep their hands to themselves.

Which also made it perfect for private conversations. Alex didn't feel guilty about depriving some grabby people of their PDA space for one night, especially on a Tuesday.

"I pre-ordered you a drink when you said you were five minutes out," Liz gestured at the glass of whiskey over ice beside her red wine.

"Thanks. How are you?"

"Oh, you know. Okay. Really happy Maria knows everything, though."

"You and me both," he nodded. The drink had been poured just long enough ago for the liquid to be thoroughly chilled but not diluted, and Alex let his eyes close as he took the first swallow, appreciating the cold, smooth burn.

Liz bumped his shoulder. "You look like you needed that."

"Yeah. It's been a long couple of days," he sighed.

"It sounded like it when Maria caught me up. You going to show me this pendant?" she grinned.

"She caught you up on the personal stuff too, huh?" Alex shook his head with a smile, but he did pull the necklace from under his shirt and hold it out where Liz could examine it.

"I like it. Maria said the glass was something Michael broke at Max's house?"

"Yeah, um, that night we were both there, with all the pizza? When you sent me off to check on him," he smiled, remembering Liz had told him to take care of his heart.

"Ah, yes, the night I foolishly tried to match Michael's drinking," she snorted. "The next day wasn't fun."

"I can imagine. He has a crazy high tolerance." Alex didn't need her to say it aloud to know her next question. "It's mildly worrying, but truthfully, it feels more like a crutch behaviour. I'm hoping he'll have less and less of a void he needs to fill that way as time passes."

Liz nodded. "Well, in a nod to irony, I'll drink to that." She clinked her glass against his and they
both drank.

"That's what I like to see! Scoot over, Alex," Maria instructed as she appeared at the booth, and he and Liz did exactly that, shifting towards the middle of the seat. "We've hit a lull so Mandy can cope on her own for a half hour."

"You okay still after earlier today?" Alex asked, giving her a sideways hug.

"I am, honestly. It filled in a lot of gaps, you know? Some puzzling stuff from over the years makes sense now." Maria kissed his cheek. "I especially like knowing about your boyfriend."

"Oh, now I see why I'm in the middle. You want your gory details payment," Alex laughed.

"Her what now?"

"My price for making the pendant was the whole story about the guy, at a future point when he was comfortable telling it," Maria explained. "So, are you comfortable? And is it gonna take more than half an hour?"

"Yes, no, and I'll need two more of these," he rattled the ice in his glass, "and probably a ride home later."

"Easy peasy, honey. Give me one sec." Maria slid out of the booth and beelined for the bar, returning in no time with the requested drinks.

"This is how you know she's a professional," Liz nodded emphatically.

"Indeed," Alex agreed.

Maria just laughed. "Okay, Alex. Spill it."

"Well," he started, "I guess the beginning was in the spring of senior year? I was in the music room looking for my guitar and someone mentioned seeing Guerin with it, so I went to find him. He was sitting on the back of his truck and there were blankets and a sleeping bag piled at the far end against the cab. I made some snarky comment about him sleeping in his truck and he came back with, were all the rumours about me true, and that sort of just, formed a bridge between us."

"Why?" Liz asked. "It sounds more confrontational than anything else."

Alex huffed a laugh. "Guerin's specialty is confrontational, in case you hadn't noticed. But it was more like, a shared sense of being targeted for gossip. And, the whole thing where most of the rumours about me had to do with my sexuality. You don't usually mention that kind of stuff to another guy unless you're either looking for a reason to act like teenage Kyle, or trying to feel out any potential interest. Guerin was always kind of stand-offish, but he was no bully, so."

"Huh. I'm going to have to watch for that among patrons," Maria tilted her head, clearly trying to remember if she'd witnessed the behaviour.

"Good luck. It's going to be subtle, especially in this town."

"Yeah, Roswell isn't exactly known for its open-mindedness, unfortunately," Liz sighed.

"Sad but true," Alex agreed. "Anyway, it was still really cold at night then, so I sort of dropped the info about the warm tool shed in my backyard. It didn't feel right not to offer, you know?"

"That was like your second bedroom, Alex. I remember the trip to buy posters," Maria smiled.
"Yeah. Posters, one of those clock radios with a CD player, stack of CDs, futon with pillows and blankets. Probably some stray jewellery," he rolled his eyes. "I can't believe how much crap I used to wear."

"Aw, you were cute." Liz ruffled his hair and they all laughed. "So Michael started sleeping there?"

"He did, yeah. I left him alone, at least until after prom."

"Right, he helped break up the fight between you and Kyle," Liz remembered.

Alex nodded. "He gave me this look after, before I walked off."

"I missed that. I was too busy being furious. I'm still sorry I didn't realise Kyle was that nasty to you."

"Water under the bridge, Liz," he draped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "Besides, it wasn't real obvious. The only other person who noticed was Max, and that's probably because he was so attuned to Guerin then. I don't think anyone else would have picked up on it."

"And then the two of them went looking for Isobel when she disappeared from prom," Liz nodded.

"Right, and you came with me, after Alex went home," Maria gestured at Liz.

"Yep. It was an eventful night all around," Liz smiled ruefully.

"So you followed up on that look, right?" Maria prodded, and Alex chuckled.

"Took me a couple weeks to get enough nerve, but yeah. Didn't go as planned so I kind of thought that was it and I must have been imagining things. Then a few days later, he turned up at the museum when I was working, and asked if we could talk in private. And that was pretty much that." A soft smile snuck onto his lips.

"What did he say?" Liz and Maria chorused.

"Nothing." Seeing their confused expressions, Alex grinned and clarified, "He just kissed me. Short and sweet first, test run kind of, then he looked at me to check that was okay. I don't know what my face said but he gave me that damn smirk and then we just kind of went for it." He shrugged. "I had like an hour and a half left on my shift, so we made plans to meet at the tool shed when I was done."

"Wait a minute, are you telling me you went from your first kiss right to sex?" Liz gasped.

"We don't all wait 10 years to kiss a boy we like, Ms. Ortecho," Alex teased, laughing when she blushed. "Come on, don't tell me you've never done that. No one-nighters? Maria, I know you have!"

"Guilty as charged. Except for the part where I don't actually feel guilty," she winked.

"Fine, yes, I have." Liz tossed her hair. "Just not with anyone I had feelings for."

Alex looked at Maria to find her nodding in reluctant agreement and his gaze went heavenward.

"How is that logical? You’ll jump into bed with a warm body but if you're looking for something more long-term, you wait? It makes no sense whatsoever."

"It's not as risky, emotionally speaking," Liz argued.

"Look, Liz," Alex shook his head, "it doesn't matter if you wait another 10 years to sleep with Max
or if you decide to do it tomorrow. Either way, it's going to destroy you and you'll be grateful for it." He finished off his drink and started on the third one.

"But I thought you and Guerin were waiting, now, are you not?" Maria checked, sounding confused.

"We are, yeah, but it's a little different. I mean, it really isn't our first time, you know?" He smiled briefly. "And really, that's about me and my issues. I need to be absolutely sure about where my head is, so my instinctive reaction to that intense vulnerability isn't to get the fuck out of Dodge. I won't do that to him again."

"Gotcha," Liz said softly, patting his arm.

"Is that what happened in the intervening years?" Maria asked.

He nodded, staring into his drink. "Yeah. Whenever I was home on leave, I just... showed up at his place. The first couple leaves, he wasn't always home, but he must have gotten my schedule after that and made sure he was available. Even though he knew damn well by then I was gonna turn up when I wanted to, use him, and go. Usually within the hour." Alex shrugged, lifting the glass to his lips and draining it. "But he never turned me down."

Alex startled when Maria's palm connected with the back of his head. "Ow, Maria!"

"I wish I'd known your shitty behaviour was why Guerin came in here looking like a kicked puppy every so often. I would have called you on it a long time ago."

"I'm not trying to excuse it, Maria, just explain the facts. You said you wanted all the gory details, well, that's what you're getting. The only time we were together when it wasn't stupidly complicated was that first time. My father ruined that in a way that fucked us both up."

"Wait, Michael's hand? That was after your first time?" Maria gasped.

"Yep. And then later that night, Rosa died. It was a hell of a fucking day," Alex opined. He glanced at Maria. "What say you bring me another one of these while I visit the gents'? Then you can go back to work and I can mope at Liz until she gets tired of me."

"Okay, honey, that sounds like a plan," she nodded, her gaze moving past him mid-nod.

Alex saw Liz hold up two fingers in his peripheral vision and smiled. "Aw, you do love me!"

She laughed. "Yes, I do. Go pee, Alex."

"Going." He exited the booth behind Maria and made his way to the restroom.

Being able to stand unencumbered at a urinal was absurdly satisfying. Without the prosthesis, Alex had no choice but to sit on a toilet, and that was fine, especially since it was usually at home anyway. But even while wearing the prosthesis, he’d found it exceedingly awkward with the crutch. After the time he’d managed to smack the leg of the guy standing next to him with the end of his crutch while struggling to do up his fly one-handed, Alex had had to stop being so damn stubborn and go back to waiting for the stall in a public restroom.

But with prosthesis and sans crutch? He could stand here and take a leak like a normal dude. It was awesome.

Alex was rinsing the soap from his hands when he felt dizzy and gripped the edge of the sink. He looked in the mirror, seeing a trickle of blood from his left nostril, and grabbed for a paper towel,
dabbing the blood away.

Stumbling away from the sink with the water still running, Alex pulled his phone out and sent a broadcast text to Michael, Max, and Noah.

*Isobel's in trouble. Find her.*

He made it into the hallway and leaned heavily against the far wall as he sent a second text to Liz and Maria.

*Help.*

Alex held onto the phone as he slid to the floor, unconscious.

[end chapter thirty-three]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you wish; same username. And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
Michael's phone vibrated at the same time Max's beeped. They shared a wary look and immediately grabbed for their individual devices.

_Isobel's in trouble. Find her._

"Fuck," Max swore. "I'll call Noah. See if you can get Alex on the phone, find out why he texted instead of phoning."

Michael nodded, already listening to the numbers dialling. Then a woman's voice.

"Michael?"

He frowned. "Liz? Where's Alex?"

"He passed out. I saw the text he sent you - it went to Max and Noah, too - before he hit the floor. He'll probably have a few bruises but nothing serious. My guess is the connection with Isobel is still active so whatever's going on with her, he got it secondhand."

"Yeah, plausible. I'm at Max's, he's talking to Noah now. I'll keep you posted, or Max will," he promised. "Take care of him, please."

He could hear Liz's smile. "I love him too, Michael. We're at the Wild Pony still, in the staff area in the back so Alex can lie down."

"Okay, good. Talk to you soon." He hung up without waiting for her reply.

"What's wrong with Alex?"

Michael sighed. "He had just enough time to text us before he fell unconscious. Liz and Maria have him lying down in the back at the Pony. What did Noah say?"

"He got Alex's text too, tried calling Iz. Her phone is still in her handbag, in the house. But her keys are gone and so's her car." Max ran both hands through his hair. "She must have driven off."

"Not as herself if she left her bag behind, I mean, it's worth a man's life to touch that thing." Michael exhaled in a long whistle, spreading his hands. "Another blackout? It's the only thing that makes sense, especially if she sent it through the connection to Alex and that's what knocked him out."

"Yeah, that was only yesterday, so it'll be pretty strong still." He looked at Michael. "You okay to drive? I don't think I should chance it, and I'll need to try to get a fix on her location anyway."
"Half a bottle of acetone and I'll even pass a breathalyser. Where's your stash?" Michael followed him and grabbed three full bottles, twisting one open to guzzle it. He held out the others to Max, who put them in a bag and went to get his boots on.

Michael hadn't taken his off so it was a simple matter of shrugging into his jacket and digging out his keys. He ushered Max out ahead of him and locked the front door remotely as they strode to the truck, belting in even as Michael pulled out of the driveway.

* * * * *

"What. The hell. Happened," Alex rasped as soon as he became aware of his surroundings. He was horizontal with a blanket over him, and he could feel the distant throb of a mother of a headache.

"Oh good, you're awake! How do you feel?" Liz's anxious face swam into view as he blinked slowly.

"Like the hangover I hadn't earned yet has arrived a few hours early."

"Let me see your eyes. I want to check for concussion."

Alex obediently kept his eyes open while Liz shone a flashlight at each eye in turn. He couldn't see anything but afterimages when she was done, but she sounded pleased, "Your pupils are reacting normally so I think it's okay. Kyle's going to drop by when he gets a break at the hospital, though, and I'll be happier then. In the meantime, I need you to stay awake."

"Yes, Mom," he sighed.

"I'm serious, Alex Manes. You passed out in the back hallway with a bloody paper towel in one hand and your phone in the other. You scared the hell out of me," she scolded. "And, I promised Michael I'd take care of you."

"Michael..." his memory comes rushing back. "He got the message? Is Isobel okay?"

"He did - we all did - but they're still looking for Isobel. She left her bag and phone at the house and took her car. Max and Michael are out driving around with Max trying to locate her. He's texting me regular updates. And actually, I'm going to text him now that you're awake," Liz smiled.

"Tell him to tell Guerin I will listen to Dr. Liz."

She laughed and started tapping at her phone.

Alex relaxed on the couch, or tried to. As he became more and more clear-headed, his sense of uneasiness increased. At length he made a decision. "Liz, can you monitor me, please? And like, pinch me or throw water on me if something seems to be going weird?"

"Why, what are you going to do?"

"I can feel... I don't know, exactly. I know from what Guerin said that a connection can linger for a few days, so I want to try to reach Izzy, you know, use it if I can. Since it's obviously still there," Alex explained.

Liz looked closely at him, probably checking how lucid he seemed, and finally nodded. "Let me get a glass of water. I've got a bottle here, but that's for you to drink, and it won't splash well anyway."

"Okay, well, I'll take the bottle while you get the glass."

Alex sat up slowly, nodding his thanks to
Liz when she passed him the bottle.

It was nice and cold and Alex swiped off the condensation, patting the chill onto his face, before cracking open the lid and gulping down several mouthfuls.

That helped ease the pounding in his head and he smiled at Liz when she returned with a pint glass three-quarters full of water and something in her closed hand that she held out to him. When Alex offered his palm, she dropped two painkiller tablets there.

"Mm, thanks, I was about to ask if you had anything, Maria's first aid kit?" He swallowed the pills. He wouldn't normally when he'd been drinking but the level of pain hovering indicated he'd burn through it at a decent rate. Alex had learned to judge how his body was likely to respond to painkillers in a lot of different configurations.

"Of course. She says hi, you're heavier than you look even minus a leg, and she'll check in when she can - they got really busy."

Alex laughed. "The prosthesis is relatively lightweight, so I guess that's my cue to hit the gym more."

"Ugh, I might go with you," Liz grinned. "Okay, I'm going to sit over here and watch you, and you do whatever it is you're going to do."

"Thanks, Liz," he smiled as she waved him off. He settled into a comfortable slouch and closed his eyes.

The last time Alex had tried anything like this had been in elementary school, when his new friend Maria had confided in him about her psychic sensitivity, and she'd tried to read his mind. They'd discovered that wasn't one of her talents. She'd been attuned to his emotions ever since, though - whenever Alex felt strongly about something, Maria knew.

Often it was helpful. Sometimes, it was downright infuriating. Especially when his feelings were strong but not clear-cut enough for either of them to identify easily.

Right now, however, it was irrelevant. The link Alex wanted to make was with a different woman. He took deep, calming breaths, centering himself, and tried to reach for Isobel.

At first, it felt murky. Twilight fog in a dense forest. Dim shapes flitted between the trees, movements seen only from the corner of his eye, the scenery blanking into featureless mist with the full weight of his gaze.

Possibly Alex watched too many horror movies, if 'haunted forest' was how he visualised his own brain.

Then, a slim column of light in the mid distance, the vivid yellow of noon time sun. Alex fixed his attention on that light and began to move through the landscape of his mind, careful where he stepped.

Every few steps he paused to look up. Always the least expected direction of attack. But he saw nothing and gradually realised he wouldn't. This badly lit trope of scariness really was just him. It didn't intersect with anything external until the light column.

He abandoned the stealth and walked normally, ignoring the forest imagery, which soon faded into an indeterminate bluish mist that swirled out of his way and closed again behind him.

*You really need to spring clean your brain, Manes.*
Approaching the column, Alex could see what looked like wrought iron bars encircling it, imprisoning Isobel. Her form was blurred some by the bars as they writhed, constantly altering the amount of space between them, but he was sure it was her.

Alex studied the movements, letting his vision narrow to the patterns inscribed by the dark, waving lines across the yellow. There had to be a consistent gap, a defined area of weakness he could use to gain access.

If there were, he couldn't find it. And that simply wasn't natural. Every barrier had a leverage point; most had several. The utter perfection of this one suggested it might not be there at all.

Well, here goes.

Trusting his skills and instincts, Alex stepped through the bars and into the light.

[Alex? How? Are you real?]

He felt Isobel's relief wash over him. [Yes, long story, yes. Need to get you out. Your body's being borrowed. Can you follow me?]

[I can try!]

He still couldn't see her well; the blurring seemed to be part of her rather than the movements of the barrier. But he held out a hand and it felt like she took it, so Alex started to walk backwards, drawing her with him. If the barrier had materialised - re-materialised? - he wanted to make sure he hit it first.

[What are you doing? We can't just ---]

Alex interrupted, [Trust me, please.]

He thought he saw her nod; more importantly, he felt her agreement.

And then they were free, two figures in swirling fog, and Alex winced at Isobel's mental scream. [MAX!]

[end chapter thirty-four]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you wish; same username. And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.
~Tas
Only years of practice kept Michael from flinching when Max bellowed in rage. He did feel his heart rate jump, though.

"Max, if you fry my engine while I'm driving this speed, we're both gonna die and then Isobel will be well and truly fucked," he warned, flicking a quick glance at his passenger.

"Sorry," Max ground out. Michael didn't care about the apology - it was the extreme tension in Max's voice that worried him.

"Alright, this is gonna sound stupid but I think it might help. Put your palm on my chest, sternum ish," Michael instructed.

He could feel Max gearing up to tear into him about exactly how stupid it sounded and Michael sighed. "Max, just shut the fuck up and do what you're told for once in your goddamned life. Hand. Chest. Now."

The touch was more tentative than Michael had expected, given how pissed Max seemed. He let go of the wheel just long enough to press Max's palm flush to Michael's collarbone. "Okay, good. Breathe with me. Just feel my chest rising when I inhale and try to match the speed."

Possibly he should have introduced Max to this technique before they were barrelling down a dirt road towards the Long Farm to rescue Isobel from fuck knows what, but now was the time Michael had.

He took slow, deep breaths, at complete odds with his manic driving, feeling his own focus sharpen at the same time as he sensed Max relaxing beside him. It didn't feel like Max might accidentally blow them up in the next five minutes anymore.

"Better?" he checked anyway.

"Yeah. Thanks." The hand withdrew from Michael's chest, leaving a cool spot. "You meditate now?"

"Uh, I don't really think of it as meditating, but, I guess? Yeah?"

Max chuckled. "Alex."

"Who else?"

"How did he get you to sit in one place long enough to learn to meditate? I remember you trying it before, more than once, and you couldn't take it for even five minutes."

Michael laughed. "There was no sitting involved, believe me. He stuck me in a field juggling tennis balls with my brain, pissed me off enough to drop some, and then got me to breathe."

"Huh," Max sounded thoughtful.
"What?"

"Well, that's obviously far from any standard practice, but it was really effective for you. Like, tailored to suit your needs specifically, using the telekinesis and everything."

"Yeah, the telekinesis was the whole point, so I think he made the rest up," he shrugged. "Whatever. It worked."

Michael saw the turnoff to the farm ahead, coming up fast. "We going in guns blazing? Or do you want me to kill the headlights?"

"Kill 'em. We might as well not announce our presence until we have to." Max seemed calm now, in full-on cop mode.

Just in time, too, as Michael turned out the lights and skidded through the turn, gripping the wheel tightly to maintain control of the truck as they crossed the Long property line.

* * * * *

"Max and Michael are almost to the farm so they're going dark now," Liz looked up from her phone.

"Okay," Alex sighed. "I wish there were more I could do, but I'm not really in good enough shape tonight to be effective backup."

"No, you are not," she agreed.

"Backup for what?" Maria enquired as she entered the room.

"Alex managed to contact Isobel and then she told Max where she is so he and Michael are nearly to her location to get her out," it came out all in a rush.

"Contacted how, exactly?" was Maria's first question.

"I followed the connection she established with me yesterday. So, telepathically, kind of," Alex ventured. It felt surreal, saying it aloud as fact - moreso than the experience itself had.

"Really?" At his nod, she heaved a sigh. "I'm so jealous."

"Well, hey, you can do it next time. I'm guessing your mental landscape won't be a blend of a horror movie and a video game. I might need to reevaluate my hobbies," Alex chuckled.

"Probably a field of wildflowers," Liz guessed and they all laughed.

"So where is she?" Maria sat beside Alex and slung an arm around him.

"Outbuilding on the Long Farm," Liz replied. "Wyatt is still locked up so I don't understand why there, though."

"Maybe the whole family gets blackout drunk?" Maria speculated. "I don't think I've served the parents before, just Wyatt and his brother. And obviously Kate was underage when she died."

"She was a drinker, though. Her, Fiona, Sarah, and Jasmine. Maybe a couple more girls. Or so said the rumour mill at the time," Alex said slowly.

"How do you know that?" Liz raised her eyebrows.
Alex shrugged. "When you're a frequent target, you learn to stay on top of the gossip. I don't remember any sources after all this time but I'm pretty sure it was a group of a half dozen or so."

Liz whitened. "Rosa was friends with Kate. Wyatt was in her year, but I guess Kate tagged along or something. I remember them hanging out. And some of the others you mentioned."

"I think we need to dig into Kate Long. Liz, could you go to my car, please? There's a laptop bag in my trunk," Alex requested. "I can just work from here, then. Maria, I assume you have a plug somewhere?"

"Yep, right there," she pointed. "I support this kind of backup. If you'd tried to go all cowboy on me, though, I would have removed your leg and put it out of reach."

His mouth opened and closed a few times, emitting a stuttered creaking sound. Finally Alex laughed. "Sometimes, Maria, you can be a real hardass."

"Isn't that why you love me?" she fluttered her eyelashes. "Anyway, I'll get snacks for you two while Liz gets the computer. Any special requests?"

"Juice, please," Alex smiled.

"Whatever's fine with me, Maria. You know what I like."

"Coming right up."

* * * * *

Michael coasted to a stop beside a vehicle he recognised as Isobel's, in a line with two others. "She's definitely here."

He killed the engine and they both got out, leaving the doors slightly ajar so as to not create noise. Max checked inside the SUV.

"Keys still in the ignition," he reported, pocketing them. "I'll keep 'em. That way, we both have a ride out if we get separated."

"Good idea."

The crescent moon shed enough light to let them see scuff marks in the gravelled driveway leading away from the SUV. Michael let Max lead the way, confident in his police training and his connection with Isobel. Okay, and the unregistered gun Max had, pointed unwaveringly in their intended direction of travel.

Whatever happened here had to stay completely off the books.

"Barn door's open." The whisper was barely loud enough for Michael to hear it. He braced mentally for the potential need to deploy his telekinesis as a weapon and slipped through the narrow opening in Max's wake.

Shifting immediately to the side, towards the outer wall, he halted at Max's raised hand and listened.

Rustling sounds familiar to Michael from his years on the ranch: hooves on straw, the restless movement of horses that weren't asleep. But there was something else.

Sniffling, and a quiet sigh in a feminine voice they both knew.
Michael tapped Max on the shoulder and when he looked over, made a gesture like he was going to shout then pointed to Max's forehead, hoping the other man would know what he meant: call Isobel. Max nodded and his brow furrowed as he concentrated.

"Back left stall," he mouthed, the consonants exaggerated to compensate for the lack of sound. "Alone."

Gesturing for Max to go first, Michael shadowed him. It was impossible to be truly silent in a hay-strewn barn but they were as quiet as possible as they made their way towards the back.

No other noise was audible. When they reached Isobel, she was tied to the upright support column.

Michael made quick work of her bonds while Max stood guard, holding a wordless conversation with Isobel about her ability to stand and walk. She didn't seem to have been hurt, so far as Michael could tell in the near dark, so he took her at her affirmative word and touched Max's arm to signal they were ready to go.

Snaking in a line behind Max and his gun, they made it back to the cars without incident.

In fact, it was so quiet, Michael started to get a bad feeling in his stomach. This had been far too easy.

He spun in slow circles, scanning the rolling grass and gravel, until his gaze caught a brief flash, light bouncing off glass in the distance.

"Goddamned son of a bitch motherfucker," Michael hissed. "I think we just outed ourselves."

[end chapter thirty-five]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you wish; same username. And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
Alex could wish for a lap desk or something to make this more comfortable; despite the name, laptops didn't really sit terribly well on a lap. Or not his lap, anyway. He stopped typing to roll his shoulders against the stiffness that wanted to settle in and reached for his orange juice.

"I can't believe how fast you type," Liz marvelled.

His laugh held little amusement. "In my line of work, a slow typist is a dead typist."

"Good point," she conceded, a note of apology in her voice. Alex flashed her a smile.

"Getting anywhere?" Maria poked her head in the room, followed by the rest of her when Alex nodded. "And?"

"Kate was an average teenage girl. I mean, she came from a well-off, racist family and she was kind of a bitch, but unfortunately those facts don't make her unusual, especially around these parts. There's nothing in her online history anywhere that doesn't track with her established identity." He noticed the way both women were looking at him. "What?"

"Look at you, speed interpreting after speed locating using your Speedy Gonzalez fingers," Maria praised. "Our little music nerd is all grown up, Liz!"

Alex rolled his eyes at their laughter. "You are terrible people and I don't know why I put up with you."

"Because we're awesome," Liz proclaimed.

"If you say so," Alex said dismissively. He was less successful at hiding the smile.

"What if Kate was, like, the gateway, then?" Liz suggested. "Maybe this-this entity, started out inside Kate. Or in humans in general, and picked Kate for some reason. And then saw Isobel, and jumped into her, and discovered she had powers?"

"So a head-hopping alien of some variety, who may or may not be the same kind as our aliens," Maria nodded.

"We don't know enough to conclude that the entity is an alien, Maria. It could be an enhanced human, or a mutant of some kind," Liz argued.

Alex didn't look up or stop typing now he'd started again but he did have to laugh. "This isn't the X-Men, Liz."

"I'm just saying, I don't want to assume we're dealing with an alien because we do not have enough data to support that conclusion."

"Fair enough. Is entity the term we're gonna use?" Maria asked. "Or we could call it Ophiuchus. After the note we now know possessed Isobel gave to Rosa."
"Entity is probably the better option. It's definitely easier to spell," Alex grinned.

"That, I agree with," Liz laughed.

"Is it just me, or does the entity seem like a big ol' creeper? Like, possessing one teenage girl to hit on another teenage girl? Or do we think it was also a teenager at the time?" Maria speculated.

"Again with the assuming."

"It was willing to kill someone it thought couldn't be trusted, and two other people for reasons unknown. It used someone else's body to commit all three murders. Isobel's body. Once it gained access, it barricaded her mind. I think it is safe to assume that barricade was intended to prevent Isobel from regaining control of her body," Alex summed up their genuine knowledge.

"Agreed. The only other assumption I'm comfortable making is that it targets people who have blacked out, which is probably because their minds are less guarded in some way during a blackout," Liz stated confidently.

"Easier access," Maria nodded.

"Holy shit," Alex breathed, staring at the information he'd just pulled up. "It's 'My Stepmother Is An Alien'."

"Isn't that a movie? I feel like that's a movie," Maria said doubtfully.

"It is. A hilariously bad 80s movie," Alex confirmed. "In this case, it's also Violet Long. Kate's the youngest of the three siblings, right? Well, she was just a baby when the first Mrs. Long died. Alice. Then Thomas Long remarried, to a woman who had been an orphan. Found wandering in the desert with no clothes and no language. Sound familiar?"

"What? How did we never know about this?" Liz gasped.

"Because little Violet was found near Santa Fe. So she didn't have a connection to Roswell until she was an adult and married a local."

"And if Kate was a baby and Wyatt is only two years older than her and Tom Jr only one year older than him, they probably didn't remember their birth mom much. Especially Kate," Maria emphasised. "Wow."

"But why would Kate's stepmother be interested in my sister? Unless Maria's right and she's a total creeper."

"No idea. Maybe her pod was damaged and that's why she hatched so much earlier. Or maybe she hatched on time and she's much less human, as a person, because she didn't absorb as much of the planet during gestation. Or she's equally human but happens to be a psychopath. Who knows. As you pointed out, we don't have enough data to support the assumptions we keep wanting to make," his voice conveyed his frustration with that fact.

"But we do have enough to give Max and Michael a heads-up. I'll just say Mrs. Long is the source, and they can take it from there when they see it," Liz spoke as she tapped at her phone.

"Yeah, they'll have everything on silent to stay dark, so sending a message won't endanger them," Alex nodded.

"What's next, then?" Maria enquired.
"Well, I'll see what else I can find out about Violet without doing a deep dive, because I don't have that equipment here," nor Michael and his secret compartment contents, he added to himself.

She nodded. "A'right, I'm gonna go check on the bar in that case. Holler if you need me."

"Will do," Liz replied absently.

Alex cracked his knuckles, rolled his shoulders, and got back to typing.

* * * * *

"Outed? Outed how? To whom?" Isobel demanded in a furious whisper. Michael just shook his head and motioned for her to be quiet.

"I saw a flash. I don't know if it was a camera, binoculars, or a rifle scope, but we are definitely being watched and not in a friendly manner," Michael spoke in a hushed voice. He exchanged a look with Max.

"Isobel, is there anything in your car that you can't lose? Or that would point to our origins?" Max asked.

"No origins, but my bag..."

"Your precious designer bag is at your house. Relax," Michael rolled his eyes. "Let's move back a bit in case I set something off. You two keep watch while I check the truck for traps." Or bombs, but he didn't say that as he started running a mental hand over every inch, grateful beyond words that he had pretty much built and rebuilt the entire vehicle by hand over the years.

There, finally, a small device in the front wheel well, driver's side. He knew there would be a matching one on Isobel's SUV - probably more than one. If the watcher knew them at all, they'd expect Max to be in there with his twin and Michael to be on his own.

He took a deep breath. "Here goes nothing."

Slowly, slowly, he learned the shape of the device, the placement of the wires, and tested carefully if a small amount of pressure had any detrimental effect. It didn't. Michael chiselled at the adhesive, holding the device firmly in place as its bond loosened. He was sweating freely, effort and tension taking their toll. Bile began to rise in his throat, stomach churning with nausea, but he didn't have time to puke now and he swallowed against it.

The device popped free and Michael slid it into view, handling it more gently than he'd done anything in his life.

01:38.

01:37.

01:36.

"Get in the back of the truck NOW," Michael ordered, clinging to his control to move the device to the ground by the farthest car as they obeyed and then he was running the few steps to the truck, swinging feet first through the open window even as he reached out with his powers again to hotwire the ignition. No time for the keys in his pocket.

He ignored everything else and floored it as the world exploded behind them.
Michael thanked all that was holy for the open desert roads as he approached the edge of the Long property. The deserted roads, as he took the turn at his old truck's maximum speed without even looking for traffic. It shuddered and jumped beneath him and he crooned, "Come on, baby, just a little longer. I need you to stay with me, hey?"

He didn't dare let go of the wheel to wipe the sweat away from his eyes, blinking rapidly against the stinging. His stomach was still letting him know about the huge power drain but he ignored that, too.

Michael was alive. The two figures in the back, covered by the wool blankets he still kept back there, were both moving.

And behind them, farther away with every passing second, was a brilliant ball of orange fire, the result of the three simultaneous car bombs that had been intended to kill them. His ears were still ringing.

Oh, but he was looking forward to Isobel complaining about how those blankets smelled.

[end chapter thirty-six]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you wish; same username. And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
Once the landscape began to have more rolling hills, Michael veered left off the road to find a hiding spot. The fire brigade and cops would be along soon and they couldn't afford to be seen anywhere near the incident. Best to park and stay put for a while.

He used his powers to smooth away the tire tracks behind the truck, erasing all trace of their passage. It made his stomach lurch worse than the offroading and the second the truck came to a full stop, Michael was out the door and on his hands and knees in the dirt, vomiting.

When he got to the dry heaves stage, he felt a gentle hand petting his hair, and Isobel sounded like she was smiling. "It's a good thing you cut your hair recently. If you'd still been going around all shaggy beast, I wouldn't have gotten to you fast enough to play curtain tieback."

"Ha ha," he joked weakly. He saw an open bottle of nail polish remover slip into his field of vision, a bigger hand holding it out to him.

"Michael, drink some of this." Max's voice was softer than he remembered hearing it for a while, at least when he was talking to anyone who wasn't Liz.

"Thanks." Michael managed to sit back on his heels and take the bottle, gulping it down. The spasms in his gut eased and the nausea began to fade, enough that he wasn't in danger of losing even the memory of food.

Isobel was still petting him and Michael had to admit, it felt nice. He directed the question over his shoulder, "You alright?"

"Aside from being royally pissed off I was used as murder bait?" she kept the volume down but her tone matched the words. "I'm probably bruised from your terrible driving and I need a shower to remove the disgusting smell from your truck but yes. Otherwise I'm fine."

It hurt to laugh but Michael couldn't help it. It was exactly what he'd needed to hear. He let out an oof as Isobel wrapped him in a hug from behind. "Ow, just don't touch my stomach, Iz."

He looked up at Max, who was leaning against the truck, smiling. "And you?"

"Pretty much the same," Max chuckled. "When we get to my place, I'll wash your blankets."

"Gee, thanks," Michael rolled his eyes but there wasn't any bite to his sarcasm.

He was far too relieved they were all right.

"That's all I can do from here," Alex announced, snapping the laptop closed. "Not long after Kate's funeral, Violet Long was institutionalised. And there the trail ends. It's like she disappeared off the face of the Earth."

"So either she died there and they didn't file the paperwork properly, or the trail was buried," Liz
sighed.

"Basically, yeah. I'll try to resurrect it from my home computer." He left it vague; she knew what he meant.

Alex checked his phone. Nothing. He looked up to find Liz doing the same and she shook her head, "No word yet."

"I'm starting to get concerned," he admitted. "At the same time, I know cell reception is poor out that way so it's equally possible they're fine and just not able to send a message for tech reasons."

Liz came to sit beside him and Alex slung an arm around her, tucking her close against his side. "You're probably right," she sighed, resting her head on his shoulder.

He chuckled and kissed her hair. "You don't believe that any more than I do."

"No, but it makes me feel better to say it."

"Yeah."

They sat quietly together, taking comfort from each other's nearness, each lost in their own thoughts.

Alex had never been the one left waiting for news. He wasn't surprised it sucked. He was accustomed to using a different skill set as part of an op; he'd been the protected one in the middle before, fingers flying over a keyboard while his unit dealt with the flying bullets. So working from here didn't make him feel excluded from the mission.

But here, he couldn't see what else was going on. He hadn't been involved in the planning, and certainly wasn't part of the execution. He was stuck in limbo.

Alex wondered if it had been like this for Michael when he had deployed. The caring without the control. The need for faith, something neither of them had ever had much of.

But they trusted each other now. He knew what Michael was capable of doing with his telekinesis. And Alex did have faith that Michael would do everything in his considerable power to keep his family safe.

Now if his heart could convince his stomach of that, Alex would be laughing.

A dual beep interrupted the contemplative silence and he and Liz both grabbed for their phones. *Got 3/3 score. Meet at HQ.*

"Yes!" Liz shot to her feet and pumped a fist in the air. Giddy with relief, Alex just laughed.

---

Wyatt's mom? Seriously? She was one of the nicer moms of that group," Isobel seemed bewildered.

"I'm just telling you what Liz texted me. I'm sure there's a lot more to it," Max reassured.

"She'd be, like, your parents' age, so if she's the fourth alien, she hatched way before we did," Michael mused. "And either took her pod with her or it was somewhere else entirely."

"Can we get into all the speculation once we get to Max's? I am starving and it's freezing out here," Isobel complained.
Max sighed and nodded. "If we haven't seen any emergency services by now, they're not coming. My guess is whoever tried to blow us up is covering it up."

"Sorry about your car, Iz," Michael patted her shoulder.

She waved him off. "I don't care about the car. Nothing important was in it and it was a way to get from A to B."

"Oh, so as long as your bag was safe." Michael exchanged a look of fond exasperation with Max. Isobel rounded on him. "Yes, Michael, like my handbag. Which is designer, yes, but who cares at the end of the day? The traditional gift for three years of marriage is leather and Noah asked Mom to help him find the perfect bag for me. So sue me, I didn't want to lose it, okay? It's important to me."

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't know." He'd put his foot in that one.

"It's fine. Let's go."

Michael looked heavenward as she stomped to the passenger door. Max gave him a sympathetic look and squeezed his shoulder. "She'll be actually fine once we feed her."

"Yeah." Michael knew from experience that Isobel didn't usually stay mad long. Short trip to a frequent destination.

He used his keys this time and got them back on the road.

The drive to Max's was silent, Isobel sulking in between them. Most times, Michael would have tried to cajole her out of the bad mood, but he was wrung out himself so he simply appreciated she wasn't talking.

When he parked, it was in the spot left empty beside Max's Jeep, with Noah's and Alex's vehicles on the far side. Max's sigh was dramatic enough to make Michael chuckle.

"Remind me again why I'm the host for this damn club."

"Because you bought a big-ass house on the edge of town that has fantastic sightlines and good defensibility and no nosy neighbours," Michael reminded him as they climbed out of the truck, to find people streaming out of said house towards them.

He hung back, smiling as Isobel flung herself into her husband's arms and Max picked Liz up and swung her around, laughing. And then his gaze landed on Alex, making his way towards Michael.

Alex took in every aspect of Michael's appearance, adding details to his understanding of the night's events. Michael looked exhausted but still gave off restless energy; the adrenaline rush had clearly not worn off yet. The knees of his jeans were caked in dirt. He smiled as Michael stuffed his hands in his pockets when Alex stopped in front of him.

"Bad?" Alex asked, searching Michael's eyes.

"Closest I've ever been to dying," Michael admitted, letting Alex look him over - and returning the favour. The furrow between his brows looked like it had been getting a workout today.

"How much power did you use?" Alex knew it was a question of scale, not whether Michael's telekinesis had been required.

"Uh, about a bottle and a half?" Maybe it was a strange way to estimate. "It was more sustained
effort with a few bursts." He gave Alex a quizzical look. "Sounds like you already knew the answer was a lot."

"Well," Alex couldn't not grin, "let's just say, I'm not going to kiss you until you've brushed your teeth."

Michael winced and they both laughed. "Sorry, yeah. Anything not already digested is decorating the desert somewhere. Nausea's gone now, though."

Alex nodded. He wanted to know more, everything about the night, and to tell Michael everything from this side of things. He wanted to talk about all of it. But none of that was what he needed at this precise moment in time.

"You okay?" Michael checked, frowning. He didn't know what to call Alex's expression but it was definitely saying something.

"I need two things from you, Guerin. One is your super secret hidden laptop."

"Of course. My illegal tech is your illegal tech, Manes."

He huffed a laugh. It sounded weird even to his own ears. "Thanks."

"And the other thing?" There absolutely was something going on in Alex's head. Michael just had no idea what. He shifted in place, jamming his hands further into his pockets to prevent himself from reaching for Alex in a semi-public place, examining the other man's face in an attempt to understand.

Alex couldn't shake the sense of having a target on his back for being this close to Michael, even among people he literally trusted with his life, but that vulnerability - that fear, he corrected himself - took a back seat right now to his need to make sure Michael was genuinely all right. He fought silently with himself, aware Michael could see the struggle but didn't feel it the same way, or perhaps at all.

"Hey," Michael kept his voice low, gentle. "What is it? Can I help?"

The question seemed to break the stalemate inside him and Alex found himself stepping forward and slipping his arms around Michael, pulling him in tight. He pressed his face against the side of Michael's neck and inhaled the reality of him.

It took a second for Michael to react. He brought his arms up around Alex and returned the hug, closing his eyes and letting the feel of Alex seep into him. Speaking quietly, for Alex's ears alone, he breathed, "Fuck, I love you."

He couldn't say it back; couldn't get past the blocks in his mind. Couldn't name or label his own feelings yet. But every time he heard those words from Michael, the fear lessened a little and Alex could breathe. He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to Michael's throat in gratitude.

Michael didn't need to hear it, though, not now. He needed to say it, to have it accepted, and he had that. It'd be nice if Alex said it someday but as long as his response continued to be kisses, Michael was more than happy with that.

The only other thing Michael needed, he was getting right now: Alex in his arms, the embrace freely given, happy to be there.

Everything else in its own time.
Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you wish; same username. And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.
~Tas
Michael felt off in Max's sweat pants and T-shirt; he didn't usually wear sports stuff, preferring jeans to anything else. Dress trousers when circumstances demanded them. But any kind of clean clothes were good after a hot shower.

"Next," he called out, joining the others in Max's living room.

"That's my cue." Max headed off to the bathroom. They'd agreed Isobel would go last so she didn't use up the hot water before the men had a chance to get clean.

Alex smiled at the way the sweat pants bunched around Michael's ankles. He looked like he was wearing hand-me-downs from his big brother, and in a way, he was. The T-shirt fit. Nicely. He probably shouldn't notice that in company, though. "Think you could eat yet?" he asked as Michael flopped onto the couch energetically enough to bounce him and Liz on the other cushions.

"Michael, how do you have anything left after that?" Isobel exclaimed.

"Just call me the Energizer Bunny, Iz," he drawled, unable to resist either the comment or the filthy grin. He chuckled at her exaggerated eye roll.

"Are you really, though?" Kyle asked mischievously. "Manes, is he?"

Teasing, Alex could cope with, and he shrugged. "I plead the Fifth, dude. But he does look cute in pink."

Michael protested, "I don't think I've worn anything pink in my entire life." The ease with which Alex could talk like his boyfriend around their friends while still having such trouble with physical contact gave Michael food for thought.

For later, because right now, his body needed actual food.

"Nearly ready," Noah leaned into view in the kitchen, holding a large wooden spoon with some kind of sauce on it. Michael raised his eyebrows, gaze shifting to Isobel, and she laughed.

"You didn't think I did all the cooking, did you?"

"I try very hard not to think about what the two of you might get up to, in the kitchen or any other room in your house," Michael shot back, but he was smiling.

"I'll get plates ready," Liz offered even as she was halfway to the kitchen.

"Came right from the hospital?" Michael indicated Kyle's scrubs.

"Yeah. I was going to stop by the Pony to ensure Alex wasn't concussed or anything, but Liz's triage was good and he's fine."

"I told you I was fine," Alex muttered.
"You'll excuse me if I don't take the word of a guy who passed out and fell to the floor."

"I suppose so," Alex sighed. He was itching to get onto Michael's laptop but he'd agreed to wait until after Kyle had pronounced him not dead and they'd eaten.

"Izzy, you're it," Max announced. Michael eyed him, feeling like a distorted mirror image.

"What do you do, man, buy three of everything?"

"Yeah," Max said, like it was a foregone conclusion. Michael could see Kyle and Alex silently agreeing. Noah did it, too, judging by Isobel's exasperated look. He shrugged. Apparently it was standard male behaviour. Michael never had enough money for multipacks, even if they would've been cheaper in the long run.

"Food's up, guys!" Liz's voice rang out, saving Michael from a potentially embarrassing explanation and causing his gut to rumble, loud enough they all heard it.

Alex elbowed him gently. "Go first. You need to replace the contents of your stomach." He raised his eyebrows at Michael's rebellious sideways glance, biting back a smile when he sighed and went to the breakfast bar.

Michael watched as Liz scooped spaghetti onto a plate and Noah ladled what was clearly homemade Bolognese sauce over the noodles. He grabbed utensils and a napkin from the piles set out. "That smells amazing, thanks."

"Thank you for bringing our people home safe," Noah smiled, and Michael just nodded, not entirely comfortable with the gratitude.

He circled back to his seat as the others lined up to get their plates filled. The pasta was as good as it smelled and the only sounds for the next while were the scrape of cutlery on china and the occasional slurp.

Alex sighed happily. "Noah, you need to come to more of these meetings. We could have a group fund for the groceries."

"I second that motion," Liz raised her hand.

"Thirded," Kyle mumbled around a mouthful and everyone laughed.

"Can't always get away but always happy to cook when I'm here," Noah promised.

The knock at Max's door startled everyone but Alex and Liz. He shared a look with her and she checked her phone, nodding. "Yep, it's Maria."

Alex stood, waving at Max to stay seated. "I got it. She couldn't get away right away either. Managing a bar is as demanding as a law firm." He unlocked the door, cracking it open enough to visually identify Maria and confirm she was alone before swinging it wide to allow her entry.

"Paranoid much?" she enquired, stepping inside and going to give him a hug. He evaded her and stuck his head out the door, scanning the immediate area.

Finding nothing out of the ordinary, Alex locked the door again.

"Precaution, not paranoia," Alex corrected, giving her that hug now. "Isobel was used as bait to try to take all three of them out."
"Oh my God," Maria's hands flew to her face and she turned to face the room. "But you're all okay?"

Alex watched her look them over the people and zero in on Isobel, who'd opted for eating before showering. "Isobel, do you want a skirt and sweater? I keep a change of clothes in my car. It'd be more of a midi length on you but it would save you from looking like a clone of your brothers."

Michael smiled at the easy way Maria made the offer and at how flummoxed Isobel was by it. She looked like she might actually cry.

"You won't mind? I'll wash them and return them as soon as possible, I swear."

"Oh, don't worry about it. I have lots of clothes," Maria reassured her.

Alex touched her arm. "I'll come with you. I want to get something out of my car, too."

"Okay. Well, hi everybody, goodbye everybody, see you in a minute!" Maria waved, and followed Alex outside.

"How was the rest of your shift?" Alex asked as they walked to her car.

"Much more normal after you left. All I had to contend with were drunk people, not fainting hackers and missing aliens."

"Fair," Alex had to laugh. He leaned against her front car door while Maria rummaged in the back seat, emerging triumphantly with a small bag. She closed the door and regarded him.

"What's up with you? Reactionary over attempted murders or is there something else, too?"

"Nothing gets past you," he gave her a weak smile, scuffing his foot on the gravel. "They nearly died, Maria. They nearly died, and it still took me a good 15 minutes to get over myself and actually hug Guerin once I saw him. Like, what the fuck is that?"

"Trauma," she said, blunt but gentle. "You've been in and out of the closet since you were 13, some by your choice, most by someone else's, and there's also some pretty awful stuff associated with being the gay son of your asshole father. So the surprising part is that it only took you 15 minutes."

He sighed heavily. "I guess." Then flinched as Maria's foot connected with his prosthetic leg, the contact ringing out. "What the hell, Maria? Are you wearing steel toed boots?"

"Yep," she confirmed, and kicked him again.

"Quit it, please. That is still attached and my leg's already sore."

Instantly contrite, she stopped. "Sorry, I didn't think of that."

"Apology accepted," he was slightly grumpy, though. "Why do you have steel toed boots, Maria?"

"Well, I could give you some story about bartending being a rough gig, but really, I just liked the boots. The toes were an unexpected bonus," she grinned.

Alex rolled his eyes. "I should have known."

"Probably, yes. So what did Guerin do?"

"Hugged me back?" He wasn't sure where she was going with this.
"Before and after that." Her tone suggested her patience was thinning.

"Okay, well, before, he stood there with his hands in his pockets while we talked a bit about what had happened. I think the pockets were self-restraint," he smiled. "He knows I'm not comfortable being, physical, around people. I mean, Isobel wasn't too bad, and it might be okay with you or Liz, but not in a group, you know?"

"Or maybe not a group that includes men?"

Alex blinked. "I hadn't thought of that. Yeah, maybe that's the block. I don't know. Not enough data," he chuckled at her indelicate snort.

"You and Liz with your data."

"In this case, my closest civilian friends are all women, so I don't know if it bothers me because the men aren't as good friends or if it's because they're men. So I need data."

"Fair enough. So, back to Guerin. You hugged him, he hugged you back, and...?"

"And," Alex elongated the word, feeling colour rise in his face, "he told me he loved me and I kissed his neck."

"You are too cute for words," she told him, patting one pink cheek.

"Maria," he complained, looking at the ground, and she laughed.

"I take it that wasn't the first time he's said it?"

"No, this was," Alex tapped the pendant under his shirt. "And a few times since. I'm not - it's okay that I'm not there yet. I just kiss him. He gets it."

She smiled. "So what I'm hearing is, you've been clear about where your boundaries currently are, Guerin is respecting them, and you're upset about what, again? A short delay while you wrestled with some genuine issues?"

"Well, when you put it like that," he sighed. "I'm an idiot."

"We all are sometimes, honey." She pulled him into a hug and Alex went willingly.

When they parted, he nodded at the bag in her hand. "Your turn. What's that about? Earlier you were calling her Regina George and now you're lending her clothes?"

"I don't know, she just looked... wrecked, I guess. I knew it had been a hard night already and then you told me about the close call and I felt compassionate, you know? And Max and Guerin do look hilariously alike in the track gear."

"They do," Alex agreed. "And Isobel, once you get to know her, she's a really warm, caring person."

"I guess I'll find out," Maria nodded. "You gonna get what you need from your car? I'd like to get some of whatever smelled so good!"

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks, Maria," he smiled.

"Anytime, you know that."
Come say hi on Tumblr if you wish; same username. And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.
~Tas
Alex finally had his hands on Michael's laptop, booting it up and checking the security subroutines. His crutches were propped against Max's desk beside him, retrieved from his car along with the padded carry bag for the prosthesis, now occupied.

He'd managed on the crutches here last night, and nobody seemed bothered by the jeans pinned up on one side, so Alex might as well get as comfortable as the track pants twins.

Maybe getting accustomed to the vulnerability inherent in removing the prosthesis around this group of people would help in turn with the far more complicated vulnerability of, say, holding Michael's hand in this safe space.

But that was a hypothesis for another time, as the system checks completed successfully and Alex began to type.

Michael relaxed against the cushions he'd piled in the corner of the couch, angled so he could easily glance over to check on Alex but with his main focus on the rest of the people perched on the assorted furniture. The setup of the living room worked really well for keeping the person sat at the desk included; not a feature he would have expected from Max.

Which was a dumb thought, because of course Max wouldn't have picked this arrangement. Isobel would have done it.

Much like she was holding court now in her borrowed finery, organising the potential contents of everyone's go bags and insisting they needed two each - one to keep in their own vehicles and a second to take up residence at Max's.

It was a good idea, Michael had to admit. He could get another set of crutches for Alex, too, and a supply of the socks. Maybe one of those folding wheelchairs for any really bad days, or if, God forbid, someone else got seriously injured. The house was a spacious bungalow with a flat yard, at least the closest parts of the yard including the driveway, so it would be decently accessible in a chair.

He smiled to himself as he realised how automatic it had become to factor in what Alex might need, or even just what could make Alex's life easier. As if Michael had needed any further confirmation of how far gone he was on a one-legged stubborn as fuck hacker.

"Izzy, you could consolidate the toiletries for the ones being stored here, at least to a certain extent," Alex contributed to the discussion. "Like, everyone has their own toothbrush, but we don't need eight tubes of toothpaste, you know? Or eight bottles of shampoo, et cetera. Individual needs can still go in the individual bags, like whatever that cowash stuff is that Guerin uses."

He offered a cheeky grin at Michael's sour look and Isobel's laughter.

"Hey, she's the one who got me onto that stuff in the first place, so I could stop impersonating Hermoine Granger from the first movie," Michael defended his hair care choices. Nobody else needed to know that Isobel still bought it for him, an ongoing gift she'd insisted on when he'd
blanched at the price after trying it. It had come out of her allowance back then and Michael had guarded the bottles like treasure in the group home.

"Well, you were being such a guy and using one of those 3-in-1 supposedly does it all products. It was dreadful," Isobel shuddered dramatically.

"And now it's all pretty and bouncy," Liz added, uncurling from Max's side at the other end of the couch and leaning over to run her fingers through Michael's hair.

"Just call my hair Maria," Michael joked, laughing with everyone else. He let Liz pet him, enjoying the gentle sensation. After a few strokes, she squeezed his shoulder with a smile and shifted back to cuddle up with Max.

Alex watched the interaction with a smile he knew bordered on sappy. Not that it mattered; no one was looking at him, anyway, while they were teasing Michael.

Results began to populate the screen and Alex's attention shifted back to the computer. Roswell Community handled a certain number of psychiatric inpatients now but 10 years ago, they were still sent directly to the NM State Hospital, formerly known as the Insane Asylum of New Mexico.

Charming. Of course, when it had been established over a century ago, his father would have been able to have him committed for being gay. And wasn't that a fun thought? Impossible now, thank God. But in 2008, supposed pillar of the community Chief Master Sargent Jesse Manes had been able to commit Violet Long on a 30-day inpatient hold on suspicion of her being a danger to herself and/or others.

So what about day 31? He knew she couldn't have stayed there; Las Vegas, NM was too far to be an effective location from which to influence people in Roswell. But as the Chief had been the one to bring her in, it stood to reason the facility would have considered it safe to release her into his care once the hold had expired and she'd been deemed okay to leave. The paper trail might have been erased but Alex had no doubt that was what had happened.

From there, the Chief could have taken her anywhere, with no one the wiser. Thomas Long wouldn't have questioned whatever Jesse Manes had told him. He probably believed his wife had died years ago in that institution. Or, he was part of it all. Species-ism wasn't much of a stretch for a diehard racist.

It was possible Tom Jr and Wyatt were in on it, too, for that matter. Maybe the whole family was extremely fucked up and Violet had a preference for possessing her stepkids.

And now that controversial episode of the X-files was playing in Alex's head. Joy. He really, really didn't want to mentally insert his father into a batshit scenario like that, but he also couldn't deny the Chief absolutely was capable of keeping a woman locked away for a decade if he believed she was dangerous and inhuman, and using her as a weapon when it was convenient.

Alex knew better than anyone that Jesse Manes was capable of anything if he believed it was the right thing to do.

He took a few deep breaths to reground himself then considered the next step. If the Chief had been keeping Violet in town, it had to be somewhere with running water, sewage, electricity. Alex knew from sorting out the utilities for the cabin that it was possible to obtain those outside of the municipal suppliers but generators were traceable, too.

And, again, it couldn't be too far away or Violet wouldn't be at optimal performance levels when she
tried to possess someone. The Long Farm was probably around the outer limit of what was a plausible range.


But first, juice. Alex tapped the desk quietly to get Michael's attention, lifting his empty glass with a smile when Michael looked over. "Would you mind?"

"Not at all." In fact, Michael was pleased to be asked, and the bright smile he gave Alex as he took the glass said as much. He got himself a refill while he was up and came around the back of the desk to deliver the orange juice, putting his mug down too as he looked over Alex's shoulder at the computer screen.

"You're drinking coffee? At this hour?"

"Relax, it's decaf. You get a hit on something?" he asked, shifting his gaze to Alex's face. Michael could see he was unsettled but it didn't seem like a concerning level.

"Not sure yet. I have some leads to chase down and then I'll have a better idea if I actually have something or if it's so much smoke."

"Anything I can do?"

Alex smiled and reached for the juice. "You're keeping me hydrated already, thank you. If I need anything else, I'll ask."

Several potential replies ran through Michael's mind, from the sarcastic to the saccharine with a stop in the gutter, but all he said aloud was, "Okay. I'll let you get back to work, then."

"Thanks." Alex looked up at Michael, genuinely grateful for the way he offered support without interference. If they'd been alone, Alex would have pulled him down for a kiss. He tried to put that warmth in his smile.

It worked; an answering smile spread across Michael's face, surprisingly bashful, and Alex's expression softened further. If Michael kept looking at him like that... Alex picked up the mug and held it out for Michael to take.

Michael took it, his smile shifting gears into cocksure and dirty. He didn't say anything, though, just took a sip of coffee and went to sit back down.

Now Alex needed to take a few deep breaths for a completely different, far more pleasant reason. He avoided looking around the room, not wanting to know if anyone had witnessed that exchange, enjoying the dull glow of arousal. This wasn't the time or place for anything else but as he started typing again, Alex thought to himself that it was nice to feel wanted.

[end chapter thirty-nine]
Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like to; same username. And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
The Sweetest Ache

Chapter Summary

Sometimes you need to take a little time to yourselves, especially in the midst of chaos.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * * * *

"Hey."

Alex looked at the soft grey fabric covering the hip that had just inserted itself between him and the desk. He frowned, and followed it up to the white T-shirt clinging to a broad expanse of chest. Nice view. Then up still further to the amused smirk on Michael's face. "What?" That look had him immediately on the defensive.

"You need to go to bed," Michael said gently. He could see Alex's jaw tightening and his lower lip popping forward. "Don't pout at me, Manes."

"Oh my God, does he still do that? Alex, honey, you've been pouting about bedtime since elementary school. It might be time to let it go, hey?" Maria giggled from her chair opposite where Max and Liz cuddled on the couch; everyone else had gone home.

"Stay out of it, Maria. This is between ---"

"It's not, actually," Michael interrupted. "Maria, Liz, and I have discussed it and agreed that you have enough leg to allow for a chair lift carry. So either you get to the guest room under your own power or the women are going to take you there."

Alex glared daggers at him but Michael didn't seem fazed. He heaved a dramatic sigh. "Fine. Move." He knew he was being childish but he couldn't help it once he'd passed a certain level of fatigue.

Michael bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as he stepped away from the desk, giving Alex enough room to stand up. Someday, overtired rebellious Alex might be annoying, but Michael thought it was adorable for now.

Locking the screen, Alex told him, "Don't touch anything. I've got stuff running."

"And you can check it yourself in the morning," Michael reassured him. He nodded pointedly at the crutches.

Grumbling, Alex grabbed them and rose from the chair, ignoring Michael completely as he headed for the hallway.

"He really doesn't like going to bed, does he?" Max chuckled.

"Alex was always the last one still awake at sleepovers. Some things don't change, I guess," Liz smiled.
"I just need to better learn where the tired vs overtired line is and annoy him into sleeping earlier," Michael laughed.

"Oh, he'll have lots of tells," Maria informed him. "Alex is nothing if not a creature of habit. I remember when he first started getting into video games, he would pinch himself to wake up if he hadn't finished that level. He learned to save the game and put it down after I unplugged the console on him a few times and he had to start over from scratch."

Liz was nodding. "I remember that. He was so pissed at you."

"Yeah, but he learned, didn't he? And he could be such a bitch the next day if he didn't get enough sleep."

"All useful information. But I don't have a problem going to bed when I'm tired, so I'm gonna," Michael indicated the hallway with his thumb.

"Go snuggle in private?" Liz finished the sentence, and Michael grinned.

"That, or sleep on the floor if he's really in a mood. Dealer's choice," he shrugged. Alex's occasional mood swings were something Michael had already learned not to take personally. "Talk to y'all tomorrow."

He left the room to a chorus of goodnights and hit the bathroom first; the light was off but the fan hadn't stopped whirring yet so at least Alex had actually gotten ready before taking his huff to bed. Michael did his thing and then went into the guest room, closing the door with a quiet snick.

"You still awake?" he murmured.

"Yes." The petulant tone suggested the pout was still present, although Michael couldn't tell in the semi-darkness. It was still cute. And Michael was still an idiot for it.

"Are we sharing, or do you need me to sleep on the floor?" He could grab one of the couches, but he wanted to stay near Alex regardless of the answer.

Alex gave a soft sigh. "Get in. Please," accompanied by folding down the covers to expose the sheet. He wasn't so grumpy he was going to waste the opportunity to touch. Not after everything that had happened.

"Gladly." Michael slid into the invited space and settled next to Alex. "You got a position preference?"

"Yeah. Right here," Alex breathed, rolling half on top of Michael and bracing on his forearms as he leaned up to cover Michael's mouth with his.

A kiss wasn't what Michael had expected but he'd take it. He ran his hands down Alex's sides and then splayed them across his back, holding him close. He let Alex set the pace, lips parting to accept the wet lick of his tongue, thighs spreading to either side of Alex's knee.

Alex made a pleased sound in the back of his throat at how pliant Michael was under him, his moodiness fading with the feel of Michael's skin against his, the taste of him beneath the minty toothpaste they'd both used. He deepened the kiss, lips and tongue insistent.

Michael's head was spinning, desire stealing through his body, sparking outward from all points of contact. Something felt different in the way Alex was kissing him. New. He couldn't identify it but it felt good; grounding. Michael stroked one hand up Alex's spine and tangled his fingers in thick, dark
hair, tugging lightly.

Humming in pleasure, Alex pushed into Michael's hand. The hum became a moan when Michael obliged, pulling harder.

The sound went straight to Michael's cock, and that popped a red flag alongside his boner. His hand stilled, simply cupping the back of Alex's head as Michael reluctantly broke the kiss and opened his eyes. Breathless, he asked, "What's going on in that brain of yours?"

It was a fair question. Alex opted to brush a featherlight kiss across Michael's cheek before looking at him, smiling. "I've wanted to kiss you since you parked and got out of the truck here today."

"Yesterday, technically," Michael returned the smile. "You were in a pissy mood when you went to bed, though."

"You mean when you sent me to bed."

"Yeah, that. Although it's good to know from your childhood friends you've always been a pain in the ass to get to sleep."

Alex chuckled. "It really is me, not you." He dipped down to press a swift kiss to Michael's mouth and exhaled shakily. "I nearly lost you. I only just actually got you, finally, and I nearly lost you."

"But you didn't. I'm right here," Michael soothed, understanding dawning. It wasn't that he'd forgotten the events of the night, exactly, but he had a prosaic view of his own safety. He'd made it out alive, taken care of the physical fallout, and put it behind him.

But Michael knew he wouldn't be so calm about it if it had been Alex who had narrowly escaped a bomb. Hell, he hadn't been, when he'd heard about the IED, and at that point he and Alex hadn't even been talking, never mind involved.

"I'm right here," he repeated, hand slipping forward to cradle Alex's cheek. "What can I do? What do you need from me?"

"I just want to touch you and kiss you everywhere. Smell you. Listen to you talk," Alex said in a rush, grinning when Michael laughed.

"Oh is that all? Okay, how about you set the timer on that fancy fitness tracker watch of yours for, I don't know, 15 minutes, and during that time you can do whatever you like and I'll try to keep talking, hm? If, you agree to go to sleep when the time's up," Michael suggested. "And, obviously, the boxers stay on and what's underneath 'em is off-limits. I know you're devastated," he smirked.

"30 minutes and you have a deal," Alex countered.

"Christ, half an hour? You don't want to touch, you want to torture!"

Alex chuckled and shook his head slightly, careful of the hand on his cheek. "Not gonna lie, I'll enjoy that, but... I need enough time to - to convince my body you're real. That you're here. You know?" he finished in a hoarse whisper.

Michael swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat. "I would have given anything to be at your bedside when you were in the hospital, so, yeah. I know."

That took Alex by surprise, though he didn't know why; neither of them had ever stopped caring. That truth had been the source of most of their conflict over the years, as it had collided with new
and changed realities. He smiled. "Guerin, I ---"

"Don't." Michael placed his thumb over Alex's lips, preventing the next words. "I don't want you to say it because you're exhausted and scared and I got a little singed. I want it to be spontaneous, someday when we're doing something completely fucking ordinary and it's the first thing that pops into your head." He pressed the tip of his thumb between parting lips, smiling at the sweep of Alex's tongue. "Yeah. Like that. I say it, and you kiss me."

It wasn't what Alex had been about to say but he'd forgotten what was, enchanted by Michael's vision of the future. He spoke around Michael's thumb. "Say it, then."

"I love you."

Alex felt the words in his bones, strengthened by the soft wonder in Michael's voice, the way he'd yielded so easily. He simply looked for a long moment at the naked emotion displayed for him in shadowed hazel eyes, then lowered his mouth to Michael's.

The light pressure shivered through Michael's body and he opened to Alex, asking wordlessly for more. He got it, Alex shifting gears into that same demanding rhythm as before Michael had asked him questions.

Kissing Michael was usually its own kind of intoxicating but right now, Alex felt like he might never get enough. There was no goal - they weren't going to have sex, nobody was getting off tonight - but kissing Michael like this, taking everything on offer, filled a need Alex couldn't yet name.

Time ceased to matter to Michael for the duration of that kiss. He felt lost and anchored simultaneously, storm-tossed while inside the bubble of safety that was Alex. It soothed and inflamed and overwhelmed every other thought in his mind.

Gently, gradually, Alex dialled it back until he was barely brushing Michael's lips with his, and then he opened his eyes and smiled. Michael looked blissful and relaxed, his lashes fluttering as if he were having trouble breaking the spell enough to meet Alex's gaze.

"Mm," Michael sighed, managing to look at Alex, noting the fond smile. "I'll tell you I love you every five minutes if it means more kisses like that." He grinned when Alex laughed. "Did you even start the timer? I obviously couldn't do any talking, but."

"Another time," Alex rubbed the tip of his nose against Michael's then slid down and to the side, hip resting on the mattress now as he sprawled across Michael, feeling his arm come up around Alex's waist. He felt heavy and lethargic after their makeout session, contented, and let out a satisfied breath. "I've got everything I need now."

[end chapter forty]
~Tas
Alex had a finely tuned body clock. So finely tuned, he could switch it off when he knew he didn't have to be up at a particular time in the morning, an ability his unit had envied to no end.

Last night, however, he'd obviously forgotten to toggle the switch before falling asleep, undoubtedly because he'd been busy kissing Michael. Who was definitely not awake. In fact, he was so still Alex would be concerned if he weren't able to feel the rise and fall of Michael's chest as he breathed.

Extricating himself, Alex slid to the edge of the bed. He'd left his folded clothes on the night table, crutches leaning against the wall between it and the headboard, everything in easy reach. It made for quick work to get dressed and out to face the day.

He ran into Liz in the hallway, both of them speaking in near whispers. "Michael did get you to sleep, right? You didn't pull an all-nighter?"

"I slept," Alex confirmed, chuckling. "I'm just awake on military time."

"Right," she nodded. "Well, I'm going to start a pot of coffee and see what Max has that looks like breakfast."

"I'll be along in a minute." He followed Liz as far as the living room, where he grabbed the storage bag with his prosthesis and took it into the bathroom with him. A few minutes later, Alex had an empty bladder, clean hands, and two feet on the ground.

Stowing the bag and crutches beside the desk, he controlled the urge to get right to it, instead accepting a mug and sitting on the couch with Liz. "So, how are you this morning?"

"Grateful," was her instant response. "Among all the other crap that happened, we survived Maria and Isobel hanging out together."

"We did," Alex laughed. "In matching outfits, no less."

"I know!" she giggled. "That was just ---"

"So Maria," he joined in, grinning when Liz lightly punched his arm.

"Jinx. Seriously, though," Liz continued, "I am grateful, for all of it. I don't usually stay over, I mean,
we're just not there yet, but I didn't want to let Max get very far away."

"Same here. Well, Guerin, not Max, obviously."

"Why do you still call him Guerin?"

"Um," the question took Alex by surprise. "That's his name? When he joined our sixth grade class, we already had three guys named Michael. One went by that, one by Mike, and Michael Danielson ended up as Dan. So we defaulted to surname for Guerin. Like with the Chrises." He frowned. "Didn't the girls do that? I mean, how many Marias did we have?"

"I don't remember, but we usually pulled in the middle name if we needed to distinguish which one."

"Oh hell no, no middle names. Last name or nickname," Alex asserted.

Liz laughed. "Okay! Do you ever call him Michael?"

"Yeah, sure. If I need him to really pay attention, or," he thought about it, mentally drifting to times he'd used Michael's first name. When Alex was falling down drunk. When he was sick. When he was five seconds from coming. He coughed at the last one; no way was Alex admitting that aloud. "Let's say, in private."

"Uh-huh," Liz nodded knowingly, clearly biting back a grin.

"Don't even start with me," he mock threatened. "To gracelessly change the subject, did you find food options?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm just chilling the pancake batter. It makes them fluffier if you start out cold."

"I will take your word for it. Do you think it's cold enough yet or should I scrounge for something else?"

"Fiiiiine. I will make you pancakes, you poor hungry boy," she patted his knee, grinning, and went to do exactly that.

* * * * *

Michael woke groggy and disoriented. And alone, although judging by the sunlight glowing around the drawn curtains, that was probably because Alex got up ages ago. He genuinely couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so deeply for so long.

But then, it'd been 10 years since the last time Michael had expended so much power in one night. He hadn't passed out the same way then because of the level of pain from his smashed hand.

In contrast, no one had gotten murdered or maimed last night, despite some asshole's best efforts, and Michael had been kissed into sleep by his new/old boyfriend. Or, new boyfriend / old lover?

Whatever. It was a vast improvement in his personal life even if it did mean there was a killer on the loose still.

Finding the rest of the house empty, Michael checked the yard. Only his and Alex's vehicles. And there was Alex, sitting on the lowered tailgate of Michael's truck.

He shoved his feet into his boots and headed outside. "Hey, everyone else gone?"

Alex glanced over at the voice, smiling. "Good afternoon. Yeah, Max and Liz both had to work."
"So, what're you doing?" Michael enquired as he joined Alex. A bucket of soapy water sat nearby and Michael raised his eyebrows. "Washing something?"

"Liz had a moment when she saw your truck this morning. Said the back of it looked scorched. I tried to tell her it was perfectly normal, it's really that dirty, but she managed to get me to agree to wash it. So I did," Alex shrugged. "Only the tailgate, though. You can do the rest yourself."

"You're a weirdo," Michael chuckled.

"Entirely possible. But it was kind of reassuring to be right. Dirt, dust, and mud. No soot," his half smile was self-deprecating.

"If it were a little warmer, I'd suggest washing the whole truck," Michael winked, "although my motivation for that could be less than pure."

Laughing, Alex shook his head. "Honestly, Guerin. I think the state of your truck is indicative of the state of your mind: perpetually in the gutter."

"Yeah? So you washing the tailgate, is that the equivalent of having wiped my ass?" Michael drawled, grinning when Alex laughed harder.

"What did I tell you? Filthy-minded."

"You know you like it."

"Never said I didn't," Alex waggled his eyebrows. He looked Michael over, not trying to disguise it, and nodded, mostly to himself. "The sleep did you good. Have you eaten yet? I was starting to think about lunch."

"No and I'm starving. I just wanted to see whether anyone else was still here, first," he admitted.

"Me," Alex gave him a soft smile. He'd made the conscious decision to stay at Max's until Michael was up and about, however long it took; the times when Alex had been gone before morning were too fresh, for both of them.

Michael returned the smile, ducking his head. "Okay, you put the gate up and I'll go forage. That should give you enough time to review your search progress, too. Since you've been out here more than five minutes."

"Ha ha." He did want to check, though. And Michael might be ribbing him about it but he was also providing the necessary window of time, a fact that still had Alex smiling when he sat down at the desk.

It slipped once he signed in and found the notification of a new message. With two attachments. Video files.

Sent from the Project Shepherd feed Alex had redirected to come to him.

"You like stir fry?" he heard Michael call from the kitchen. "Max has a million vegetables."

"Stir fry is good, thanks," Alex kept his voice even as he answered, in total opposition to the way he was staring at the files. He ran a quick virus scan and, making sure the sound was turned off, opened the smaller file.

An aerial view of a blonde woman in what looked like a horse stall. Hands bound to an upright post.
Isobel.

The camera zoomed in and Alex realised she was muttering to herself. He would check if the video had sound later; right now, he could see her lips forming his name. It hit him with a shock that this must have been while he'd been at the Pony trying to contact her. A guess verified in another moment when Isobel's face lost its vacant quality and she began to struggle against her bonds.

A jump in the video and two men appeared. Alex watched as Michael freed Isobel without tools or hands, his powers caught on tape. The video ended once they left the stall.

He knew what the second one would be.

The slow slink through the dark to the cars. The moment of realisation on Michael's face as he turned circles trying to find the watcher. The sweat pouring off him as he worked at some unseen task.

The small device floating out from the wheel well of his truck, and away from them even as Max and Isobel clambered into the back of the truck at his shout. Michael careening in through the window then speeding away, the wheels kicking up clouds of dust that turned to flame.


It didn't take long for him to settle himself. It rarely did nowadays. But his stomach still knotted up tight as he read the text of the email.

*Identities of F and M1 confirmed. Cannot confirm M2 at this time but circumstantial evidence indicates high level of probability.*

*VL control of F disrupted by outside influence. Potentially M2 but inconclusive.*

*M1 considered armed and extremely dangerous.*

As per attached, mission was not successful. We underestimated M1's abilities. However, we now have the required confirmation and can proceed with termination.

Collateral damage will be avoided as much as possible but the presence of allies or accomplices will not compromise the mission.

Alex read it through several times, figuring out right off that F meant female and M, male. That Michael was M1. Max, M2. And VL had to be Violet Long.

With each reread, his anger grew. Swelling to fill all available space within him. Crowding out other emotions to create and conquer yet more space. Alex vibrated with fury.

He stopped reading only when Michael came over with two plates of stir fry. Then his gaze travelled to find hazel eyes.

The strength of the emotion in Alex's eyes, his entire body, slammed into Michael. He actually took a step back, stunned silent.

"I will end him," Alex vowed, rage throbbing in his low voice.

Michael didn't need to ask who. He pieced together the source of that declaration from the context of Alex at the computer and all hell having broken loose last night. And while he absolutely could sympathise with the impulse, he knew Alex better than that. "You can't, Alex. Not unless by some
miracle it's in a fair fight. You would never forgive yourself."

"He tried to kill you, Michael. You and your family. He's going to try again. And he doesn't care about taking out anyone else along the way."

The stir fry could wait. Michael put the plates down on the desk and faced Alex. "We will take him down. But not in revenge - not in cold blood." One side of his mouth quirked up in a cynical smile. "If I believed you could handle that, I would have killed him a long time ago. You wouldn't have forgiven me for it. You won't forgive either of us now, either."

"But ---"

"No." His head shake was emphatic. "No, Alex."

Alex glared at him, but he couldn't truly deny Michael was right. Revenge wasn't part of who he was. Even in these circumstances.

But Isobel had clearly said his name, and his dad knew by now that he and Michael were at least friends. Alex was friends with Max, too.

And that made him part of the target group of collateral damage. It wasn't just Michael, Max, and Isobel that Jesse Manes wanted to murder. It was his own son.

Rage became reaction and Alex began to shake, tears filling his eyes as his breathing hitched on a sob.

"Oh, babe," Michael sighed softly and moved in close, letting Alex bury his face against Michael's chest. "I've got you." He kept his hands on Alex's shoulders, deliberately loose, giving him room to move - and to grieve.

[end chapter forty-one]
New Digs

Chapter Notes

My Sunday writing time was co-opted by the ridiculous, aka the Alex and Kyle road trip ficlet. Damn plot bunnies.

This part might be emotional going in places? I'd rather over-warn than upset.
~Tas

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

* * * * *

Weeks slipped past and nothing happened. No attacks. No attempts on anyone's life. No abductions, alien or otherwise.

No visible surveillance of the physical or cyber kind, either. It was starting to drive Alex a little nuts. He suspected that was the point. His father was nothing if not a master manipulator and he knew exactly where Alex's pressure points were.

Alex hadn't been idly waiting for someone else to make a move, though. He'd stripped down the bunker under his cabin to the outer wall supports and reconfigured the space to suit his needs, running fibre optic data cables, better power supply, and security monitoring. The furniture intended for Rosa was gone, replaced by high tech equipment and its accompanying desks and chairs, cabinetry holding basic emergency supplies for humans and aliens alike, plus enough roll pads, sleeping bags, and pillows to accommodate up to 10 people.

Assuming they were close friends, anyway. The floor measurements indicated everyone would fit, but it would definitely be a squeeze.

He'd also carved out a tunnel leading from his new lair to a concealed exit in the trees a good distance from the back of the cabin, because a room with a single entry point made Alex twitch.

As did being in an enclosed underground location without a toilet so they'd put a tiny cubicle off the tunnel with a portable camping toilet. It was just big enough for Alex to manage with both crutches and the grab bars, behind the dubious privacy of a heavy duty shower curtain. Like the rations and first aid kits, though, it really was intended more for emergencies. Still, having it there made him feel more comfortable even if he never used it.

To be fair, Michael had done most of the literal heavy lifting on the tunnel, and not with his hands. It had proved useful for getting some data on sustained use of his telekinesis. How it corresponded to the equivalent in musculoskeletal effort. Where the nausea boundaries were. What kind of acetone levels he needed to maintain in his body to be able to commit to a sudden large increase in power output requirements without being incapacitated by it.

Alex had cleaned up a lot of vomit the last few months.

"So, what do you think?" he asked Maria, smiling as she twirled in the centre of the room, taking it all in. She'd known about the former detox dungeon, as he, Kyle, and Michael had fallen into calling
it, but Alex hadn't seen any point in subjecting Maria or Liz to the space as they'd originally found it, and neither woman had argued.

Post transformation was a different story and now Alex wanted to show it off.

"It's... Wow," she shook her head. "It looks like some kind of spy headquarters!"

"Well, Guerin broke the news to Max that I knew everything by introducing me as the newest member of the Save the Aliens Club, so it's more like a club house," Alex grinned.

She laughed. "I like it."

"Besides, Max's place is still headquarters. This is the fallback location," he explained, waving at the room as a commentary on its size relative to the bungalow.

Maria nodded and plonked down in a chair beside him. "You know, the geek speak I'm used to, you started that in school, but it catches me by surprise sometimes when you say, like, super tactical or military stuff. It's not that I don't know where you've been and what you've been doing for the last decade, it's just it doesn't translate in my head or whatever."

"I get that. It's pretty far from your own experiences," Alex smiled. "But tactical thinking is a huge part of my mindset now. It influences how I look at everything, like automatically checking where all the exits are when I enter a room."

"Everything, huh?" she winked at him. "Must make it interesting in the bedroom."

"Uh, yeah, I guess," he gave an awkward shrug. That wasn't really something Alex wanted to discuss.

Unfortunately, Maria not only knew him well but she was especially sensitive to his emotions. Her mouth dropped open. "Alex Manes. Do you mean to tell me you still aren't sleeping with Guerin?"

"Well, I didn't mean to tell you anything," he snarked, sighing when she whacked his forearm. "No, we're not having sex."

"Why the hell not?"

He pointed at the side of his head and twirled his finger.

"Ah, brain stuff. Like?" she prompted.

"Maria," Alex warned her off, or tried to. His tone was more whiny teenager than stern adult. When she raised one perfectly arched eyebrow, he sighed. "Like, I'm just not ready. I don't know what else to tell you."

"Is there a tactical advantage to being celibate?" Maria wondered.

"Maybe?" He spread his hands. "There can certainly be disadvantages to being in a gay relationship, and having a boyfriend usually involves having sex with said boyfriend, so I suppose not having sex could be viewed as, I don't know, a less disadvantaged version of the relationship?" Alex sighed. "None of which feels accurate. It's just some mental block, Maria. I haven't unpicked it all yet."

"What do you know, then?" her voice was gentle.

"We fool around, we get to a certain point, and it's like a klaxon goes off in my head," Alex shrugged. "You know, red alert."
"Please don't tell me you're being cockblocked by Star Trek."

Alex had to laugh. "No, but it's a convenient shorthand."

"And everything, like, does what it should?" she scrunched up her face.

"Are you seriously asking me if I have erectile dysfunction?" He burst out laughing. "God, Maria, no. I mean I appreciate the concern, but everyone's body parts are on board and Michael's brain is on board. It's only my stupid noggin that's still treading water."

"Okay, I just wanted to make sure, relax," she rolled her eyes. "How's Guerin about not getting any?"

"Better than I am," Alex admitted. "He's surprisingly patient."

Maria tilted her head, clearly thinking on that. "Yeah, I could see it. He likes to take care of people. Well, his people, at least. Everyone else can go hang."

"Fair assessment," he chuckled. Michael had a protective streak about 20 miles wide.

"Okay then, seeing as you and your boyfriend are basically fine and your brain will get with the programme when it's good and ready, let's move on to what I actually came here to talk to you about. Namely, Isobel," Maria sighed.

"Uh-oh. Do you need a referee?" Alex enquired. "I thought you were getting along okay?"

"It's not that," Maria refuted. "The uneasy truce continues. Actually, it isn't even that uneasy anymore. But I think we've hit the limit of what we can do. Those damn blank spots are not budging."

"All right," he nodded. "So we've managed to gain a thorough understanding of Isobel's triggers, at least."

"Yeah, any time anyone talked about leaving town related to graduation. Which was a lot," Maria snorted. "Last semester of senior year of high school in a small town? She was having tiny fugue states constantly."

"That fits with Max's theory about it being a PTSD type reaction to abandonment."

"Yep. But it doesn't help us now, you know? Isobel isn't currently feeling any threat of abandonment and we're sure as hell not going to induce that fear for testing purposes. It's not a temporary issue like Guerin upchucking from moving dirt," she sighed, obviously frustrated.

"Her powers are more complicated. Less measurable," Alex agreed.

"Right. But we've gotten a good look at the bits around the blackouts so it just seems she, like, gravitated towards Rosa whenever possible." Maria smiled, "I can understand that, she was special. I could have done without seeing so much of teenage me around Rosa, however. I'd forgotten how epic my hair could be!"

"Your hair and my eyeliner," Alex shook his head with a rueful smile. "The questionable fashion choices of our youth."

Maria laughed. "You make it sound like we're ancient!"

"The last year, year and a half or so feels like it's lasted a century," he made a wry face.
"Since your leg?" she asked, empathetic as ever.

"Yeah. Getting mobile again afterwards was a long battle. Then I landed back in Roswell, working at the same base as my father, always a barrel of laughs. Ran into Guerin, and..." he trailed off and shrugged. "It's been busy."

"You still haven't seen him? Your dad?"

"Nope. He's on some classified mission, officially. What he's actually doing and where he is, who the fuck knows." It was worse than it would have been to work alongside him knowing he wanted to kill Alex and most of the people he loved. That was a new degree of hate, but Alex had spent most of his life being aware he was one witness away from a beating; he knew how to cope with it.

This uncertain limbo where the enemy was in parts unknown with no indication whatsoever of when, where, who, or how he would strike, well, it kept a knot of anxiety in Alex's middle and rattled him.

Which brought it right back around to him being manipulated despite being fully aware of it while it was occurring. And that pissed him off even more.

"Alex, honey, you're this close to having steam come out your ears. You are prepared in every way possible. It doesn't matter when he shows up. You'll be ready," Maria assured him, confidence imbuing her statements.

He nodded, not trusting his voice to carry the same conviction. She smiled and reached over to take his hand. "You're stronger than you know."

"Strength has never been the issue, Maria. I know I'm strong. Hell, I can prove that just by walking across the room on my fake leg." He wet his lips, confessing, "I'm not scared for me."

"You're worried about Guerin."

"And everyone else, but yeah. I am absolutely shitting bricks terrified of losing him." There was a certain comfort in voicing the fear, contrary to his expectations.

"He's not exactly helpless," she squeezed his fingers. "Plus, he's equally invested in keeping you safe."

"I know. That makes me leverage. The weak spot in Michael's armour. And the longer this limbo drags on, the deeper we get bound to each other, and the bigger that weak spot gets." God, it was a relief to say it.

Maria simply nodded and turned his hand over, freeing his palm so she could trace over it, studying the lines etched there.

"What?" Alex asked after several minutes of silence.

"Nothing conclusive," she spoke slowly, "but, I'm thinking about that glass you found down here. The ship piece. What did you do with it?"

"Gave it to Guerin, to go with the other pieces he has. He's been studying them for years. The piece I found didn't seem to be any different, so I don't know if he's done more since getting it. Why?"

She tilted her head, brow furrowing. "I'm not sure. I just have this image of it, a sense it means something." Maria looked up at him. "Maybe try interacting with it together?"
"Interacting how?" Alex raised his eyebrows. He trusted Maria's intuition - had plenty of experience with it over the past 20 plus years - but the vagueness could be a problem. "All I did before was lose time watching it light up while I petted it like a cat."

"By yourself?"

"Yeah. We never did anything with it together. Guerin got excited when he saw it and let it slip about being an alien, so I kind of got sidetracked." It was funny now and Alex smiled.

"I can see why!" Maria laughed. "But, Guerin's powers don't naturally have a connection component, right? Not like Max or Isobel?"

"As far as we know, yeah. You think the glass might affect that?" The idea intrigued him.

"I don't know, Alex. I have a feeling you should try doing something together with it, that's all. And maybe try it with Isobel too, either by yourself or all three of you."

"Well, it's a better idea than any I've got, since that's a big nothing," Alex rolled his eyes. She gave his hand a last squeeze and let go. "I hope it helps. I gotta go, but let me know how it goes, yeah?"

"Of course." Alex stood when Maria did and wrapped her in a hug. "Thanks for the interrogation."

She laughed. "Always. What's a bestie for if not forcing you to face the uncomfortable shit?"

"Touché." He kissed her cheek. "You happy letting yourself out?"

"Duh. I'll leave you to your lair," Maria winked, and vanished up the ladder.

Leaving Alex to think over everything they'd both said as he watched her car back away from the cabin towards the road on the feed from the exterior security cameras.

[end chapter forty-two]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like to; same username. And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
As Michael pulled in behind the cabin to park, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He shook his head with a small smile. That would be Alex texting from the bunker. Dude was not getting enough sunlight lately.

* Be there in a few.*

Uh-huh. Michael texted back before exiting the truck.

*Liz sent food. Get your ass to the kitchen.*

He didn't wait for a reply, grabbing his stuff and following his own order, depositing the takeout containers on the table before divesting himself of boots and jacket.

By the time Michael was getting out utensils, arms were sliding around his waist. He couldn't stop the smile at the feel of lips pressed to his nape. "Hi."

"My ass is in the kitchen," Alex murmured, nuzzling the warm skin above the collar of Michael's shirt. He smelled like fresh air and sin.

"So it is." He picked up one of the hands resting on his belt buckle and brought it to his mouth, dusting kisses over each knuckle. "Now it needs to go sit on a chair."

Alex chuckled and stepped away, taking a seat. He opened the container with his name on it and took the knife and fork Michael handed him. "Thanks."

"No problem." Michael dug into his container. After a few bites, he continued, "I brought the glass. I have put it through the same tests as my pieces, with the same results, so the only thing different about it is the size. And how it was located."

"Right. You dug up most of your pieces, or someone else did and you bought them. And all the fragments have to have been removed from the ranch ages ago, because the entire hole for the foundation of the new facility has been dug now and we didn't come across anything unexpected," Alex thought out loud.

"Glad I didn't have to puke through that endeavour."

Alex laughed. "Yeah, no kidding. You might have flooded it."

"At least I still have all my teeth after so much acid." He bared his teeth in a predatory grin.
"You do," Alex agreed. That really shouldn't be hot. In fact, it was a little silly looking. And yet. Now he was thinking about biting, and not the kind that had anything to do with his dinner.

The reaction didn't go unnoticed and Michael's mouth quirked into a more standard grin, sly and smug. He pointed at Alex's food with his chin. "Eat. You'll need your strength if you wanna follow up on that thought."

"Work first, play later," Alex mandated, smiling.

"Because Alex has priorities but he is not a dull boy," Michael teased, and they both laughed.

"Something like that."

In the end, the bedroom had seemed like the best location, slightly removed from the main part of the cabin and lacking expensive equipment to potentially damage. Alex didn't want to risk the bunker space he'd so recently refurbished.

"Okay, remind me again what Maria actually said," Michael requested, sitting on the bed with the curved glass fragment waiting on the night table. He didn't want to pick it up until they were ready to do... whatever it was they were doing.

Alex sighed. "It was vague. Just that we should interact with it together. I mentioned I'd only petted it before - you've done a lot more with it - but she was clear it needed to be in tandem. And to pull Isobel in if it doesn't do anything with just us two."

"Petting it is, then." Michael could not have made that sound innocent to save his life so he went all the way in the other direction, infusing as much suggestive filth into his voice as possible.

"Michael."

He laughed; first name meant Alex wanted to be serious but he sounded a bit too breathless to be truly authoritative. "Alright, alright. How about you get comfy sitting up against the pillows, and I'll sit between your legs and hold the glass. That way, if it gives off any alien energy, it'll be on the alien. And you can reach around me to pet the glass."

"That works." Alex manoeuvred into position. "And we've got three different alarms set for an hour from now, in case we both lose time."

"Yep." Michael moved up the bed, settling against Alex. He made sure he wiggled a lot to get comfortable, grinning when he felt Alex laugh.

"You are incorrigible."

"I know," he craned his neck to look at Alex's face, his smile softening. "Because I love you."

Alex had no defence against that look and those words, and he ducked his head to fit his mouth to Michael's, taking a long, leisurely taste. At length he murmured, "Can we get this show on the road now?"

Michael's response was to reach for the glass and settle into place on Alex, feeling as ready for the unknown as he could. It was already luminescent with his hands alone. He arranged the fragment on his lower ribcage, holding it firmly with the curved side against his body, his fingers curled over the raised edges and the ends left open for another pair of hands.

"Here goes nothing," Alex had a nervous edge to his voice. His experiences with an alien connection
to date hadn't exactly been fun but he was game to keep trying.

The glass felt as smooth as Alex remembered, already giving off a gentle warmth from Michael's hands. He stroked its surface, watching the interplay of light and golden glow, patterns repeating across the soft white fabric of Michael's T-shirt.

Michael found his gaze following Alex's left hand, appreciating the colours dancing over elegant fingers. Without thinking about it, he moved his own left hand to cover Alex's, sliding the pad of his thumb along the connective tissue between Alex's thumb and palm, stroking his skin in a slow rhythm that matched the way Alex's right hand continued to move over the glass.

Gentle as it was, the touch felt intimate, coaxing Alex into slow, deep breaths. He could feel Michael mirroring, breathing in sync, and Alex traced a path across the glowing surface with his right hand, curling over the opposite side of the same edge as Michael's right hand, interlacing their fingers against the glass.

Colours swirled in front of Michael's eyes as he stared at their joined hands, feeling calm and secure in Alex's arms. His vision faded into a bluish grey mist. Figures darted just outside of his view, gone when he turned his head, and he realised the scene looked familiar though he'd never seen it before. He recognised it from Alex's description of his mindscape the night they'd rescued Isobel from the Long Farm.

So this foggy, desolate, slightly creepy place was his boyfriend's brain. He definitely wasn't getting outside enough. Michael half expected things to jump out at him, phantoms sweeping through plumes of dry ice like in the scariest kind of haunted house.

But a path cleared as he walked, coming to stand in a sunlit clearing where two boys organised a pile of lumber and began measuring and marking where each needed to be cut. They laughed, talking about the treehouse they were going to build with the wood and teasing each other good-naturedly.

Both looked about 12 or 13, and when the skinnier boy pushed his long hair out of his face, Michael recognised Alex. He looked more closely at the other boy, finally identifying Kyle. This must have been their last summer as friends. Alex's last summer of childhood, before his father began disciplining him for something that had never been wrong and his best friend transformed into his secondary nightmare.

The weight of future context lent a poignancy to the carefree laughter and easy cooperation between them.

Michael kept walking, cutting around the trees to re-enter the mist in search of present-day Alex.

Who was having an adventure of his own as the hypnotic swirl of colours deposited him straight into the memory of a small boy wandering around a darkened house, no one else in sight. The riotous curls topping the kid's head could only mean this was Michael's memory and Alex smiled at how cute he had been.

Alex watched as the boy climbed onto a chair and then the kitchen table, and his smile died when he recognised the drug paraphernalia scattered everywhere. The boy knew what he was after, a small bottle with a profile Alex knew: nail polish remover.

It wasn't until the boy had climbed down with his prize that he took a couple of swigs, and on the face tilted up in the scant light, Alex could see bruising. He was older than Alex had first thought, maybe nine, the messy hair and his thinness making him look younger.
Alex had wondered how the trio had learned about acetone; he'd even suspected it had been Michael's discovery, knowing something about the kinds of foster homes he'd had to deal with. But seeing it broke his heart. He watched until the child left the kitchen, unable to leave him on his own in there, before trying to find a path of some kind.

It seemed, however, Michael's brain did nothing so linear and mundane as a path. Instead, Alex had a sense of being bounced like the ball on a roulette wheel, and then dropping immediately into whatever memory he'd landed on.

O-kay, and that was more naked woman than Alex was accustomed to seeing. He moved around the couple on the couch until he could see Michael's face. Teenage, maybe a bit younger than the first time Alex had seen him naked, shoulders not so broad. They were whispering and giggling as the woman - no, girl, Alex realised, they looked about the same age - shushed Michael.

"We have to be quiet. If the little ones wake up, you'll be in for it when the Wilsons get home and I'll be out of a job!"

"I know, but you feel," kiss, "so," kiss, "good, fuck."

Next was a low groan intimately familiar to Alex and he really needed to get out of this memory; he already felt like a serious voyeur and this wasn't even his kind of porn.

Alex ignored the soft sounds of passion as best he could and closed his eyes, reaching out with his mind, trying to replicate how it had felt to find Isobel.

{Guerin? You out there? Can you visualise a meeting place?}

Michael heard the questions, or felt them, maybe; it was more like they simply appeared.

{Cabin clearing? Tennis balls?}

It was the first location he could think of that they both knew well. And thinking of it seemed to do the trick as the mist around him melted away, leaving him stood in the centre of a circle of neon yellow dots.

Alex had only to picture the clearing and he felt the whiz and drop of movement, opening his eyes to see Michael - his Michael. He wanted to make sure, though.

{Sooooo, it worked. I think. Assuming you're actually present-day Guerin. Where's your physical body at the moment?}

The eye roll was definitely his Michael.

{On your bed, with you and that piece of glass.}

{Just checking. I've seen a few of you now.}

That didn't sound good and Michael winced. {It's me, me, now. Let's wait for wake-up to share, uh, past personal stuff. Speaking of which, how do we? Wake up?}

Alex wondered what Michael had seen. He was right, though, that was a discussion for later.

{Maybe get into the same configuration as our actual bodies?} Touching the healed stump of his leg was what had broken the memory loop for Isobel, grounding it in the physical. Alex hoped the principle would hold true more generally.
Alright. Michael concentrated and the air shimmered, dissolving into Alex's bedroom. He bowed towards the bed with a flourish. After you.

Show-off. But Alex couldn't help the smile as he settled on his virtual bed with Michael sprawled over him. The details sharpened gradually and he noticed their joined hands. Let go of me and the glass.

Michael followed the instructions, left hand first where it had simply covered Alex's, then disentangling the fingers of the right. He let his arms drop to the side, away from the glass.

Alex completed the move, leaning over to set the glass back onto the night table. Once he returned to his position, his body began to tingle, like head to toe pins and needles. It was disconcerting.

Not keen on the feel of re-entry, Michael said, and realised he could hear himself speaking. A grin broke out. Alex? You with me?

Blinking, Alex scanned the room and the man in his arms. He noted that here, back in their bodies, they still held onto the fragment, and he echoed his previous action, moving it out of reach.

Yeah, I'm here. Holy shit.

Laughter bubbled out of Michael's throat. Fuck, that was intense. I didn't expect it to work like that. With you and Iz, it sounded like you both relived your memory, like, in first person, when you originally connected. This was more observation. For me, anyway. How about you?

His enthusiasm was catching. Yeah, this was more like when I tried to follow the connection to find Isobel. I was aware of being there, separate from the scene itself.

Michael leaned sideways so he could look up at Alex. Do I want to know what you saw?

Alex chuckled. Really, Guerin, the babysitter?

The full ramifications of the reference hit Michael all at once and he choked on a laugh. Oh, fuck, I'm sorry. There's a lot of naked women in my head. I never even thought... he started laughing in earnest.

I'm glad you find my plight so amusing, Alex said dryly.

Sorry, Michael apologised again once the giggles faded. I watched you and Kyle building a treehouse.

Yeah, I've been thinking about that summer. What with me and Kyle mending fences, you know? Our friendship is feeling more like it did back then. It's good, Alex spoke thoughtfully.

And I've been thinking about Natalie because that's kind of the closest thing I've had to a romantic relationship before you. The Wilsons had this regular date night and they didn't trust me to babysit the younger kids so they hired her. Couple times a month for the last half of junior year. Happiest I've ever been about not being trusted, Michael snorted.

Was she your first?

Yeah. She was a year older, so she went off to college that summer. And I got my driver's licence, which meant the truck was actually mine. Started sleeping there not long after, Michael remembered.
"What do you mean, the truck was yours then? Was it a gift?" Alex honestly couldn't recall a time when Michael hadn't had that truck. But then, he'd really only started paying close attention to him senior year.

"Sort of?" He wasn't sure what to call it. "Sanders caught me stealing from the junkyard the summer before that. Instead of turning me in, he offered a challenge: I could choose any of the vehicle skeletons in the yard, and if I could get it rebuilt and running using only materials in the yard, then he'd sell it to me for five bucks when I had a licence. I did, he did, and he also gave me a job because I knew what I was doing by then."

"I did wonder how you'd ended up working there in high school. Huh. That's really cool," Alex smiled.

"Yeah, he's been good to me," Michael agreed. "He could still see alright when I went to work on the ranch. His eyesight has gotten pretty bad since, though. Cataracts, I think he said? I do most of everything now, take the pressure off where I can."

"Mm," Alex made an approving noise. Sanders obviously counted as one of Michael's people.

"So what else did you see? You mentioned multiples of me?"

"Yeah. The other memory was from when you were younger. Taking a bottle of nail polish remover from the kitchen in the dead of night." He didn't disguise it had made him sad.

"Ah, yeah. The meth heads. Useful for the discovery of acetone's effects, not so much otherwise," Michael spoke matter-of-factly, without the bitterness that would have edged the words before. "Makes sense, I've been thinking about acetone a lot, with the tunnel and everything." He chuckled, "And Liz is fooling around with making, like, an alien energy drink. That's why I was over there, trying the latest version. Some berry flavour. Izzy will probably like it better than I did."

"Acetone and electrolytes. Could be good, actually - the electrolytes are likely to be better for you than the non acetone ingredients in the remover."

"Yeah, that was her take, too." Michael noticed he'd been sliding farther down the bed as they talked. He sat upright and turned to face Alex. "So we've done the work, right? Does that mean we can play now?" He glided a palm across Alex's chest, offering him a heated look.

"Hm. What if I want to be dull?" Alex arched one eyebrow.

"I don't think you've been dull a day in your life. Not with those cheekbones," Michael grinned.

"Oh, I see. You think compliments are going to get you what you want," he did enjoy teasing Michael.

"We-ell," elongating the vowel as he shifted onto his knees and straddled Alex, "I could just call you a sex god."

Alex laughed, brushing his fingers along Michael's jaw. "I think you need to be actually having sex to qualify for that title."

Shrugging, he nuzzled into Alex's hand. "You were. You will be again when you're ready. My opinion stands."

For that, Alex had no answer beyond kisses.
[end chapter forty-three]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!

And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
Chapter Notes

Sooooo sorry, folks. Aside from the emotional debris from eps 12/13, I've been sick and my aunt died. So this is the third bloody iteration of this chapter I've written because my heart wasn't back in it until yesterday. I'm feeling better now, though, and should be on track again.
~Tas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * * * *

"So, we need to choose a safe space to meet, which isn't here, so we can come back to ourselves afterwards, here." Liz scrunched up her face and closed her eyes briefly. "Does that even make sense?"

Michael snickered, drawing glares from the assemblage. He shrugged, smirk intact.

"It does, more or less," Alex asserted, nudging Michael in the ribs.

"And I will remain outside the group connection, make sure everyone is still breathing and so on," Isobel declared.

"Right, and you're doing that because your powers mean you can control what happens in the mindscape and we want to see if it's possible without that direction," Kyle spoke as if he were sounding out the idea.

"Exactly!" Isobel gave him a brilliant smile.

"For a neutral space, what about the Crashdown? We all know it well," Noah suggested.

"Mm, no," Maria objected. "The rest of us have literal decades of memories there. That's a lot of potential personal crap to accidentally stir up, you know?"

"Good point. Not the Crashdown," Liz agreed.

"Well, we're only inside for warmth and safety, right? Otherwise we'd be around the fire. So why don't we use that? Bodies in the house, minds outside?" Max provided an alternative.

Alex nodded alongside everyone else; it was a logical choice. "Let's visualise ourselves standing, so we don't have to assign chairs or anything."

"I guess that means your leg comes with, huh?" Kyle asked.

"Yes, Kyle. It does," Alex informed him dryly.

"Okay, so, logistics," Isobel cut in determinedly. "Alex, how are you with sitting cross-legged?"

"No can do, Iz." He bit back the 'sorry' that automatically wanted to append itself whenever he had
to enforce a limitation.

"Then I think this is going to work best in two groups, anchored by Max and Michael. And since we've tried this in pairs already, with the three sets of partners, and all of you at least once with me, I'm going to split up couples. So, Michael, you go sit by Liz, and Max, you take his seat beside Alex."

Alex watched everyone move where they'd been told to go, an amused smile playing around his mouth. Not only was Isobel a master of organisation, she naturally did it around Alex's needs. Much like Michael did. But where Michael had learned it from spending time with Alex, asking questions and observing, Isobel seemed to have absorbed a permanent awareness after their shared reliving of the loss of his leg.

It probably would have freaked Alex out once upon a time. You know, before he'd been knowingly dating an alien who could levitate stuff. Forming a close friendship with his boyfriend's equally alien sister didn't really register as weird anymore.

"Right, so, Noah, you join Michael, because he'll be marginally less traumatised if he sees something he shouldn't," Isobel grinned at the collective male groan. "Maria, you're with Max so each group has a woman." She paused, looking between her brothers, and decided, "And Kyle, you go with Michael."

Michael smirked at Kyle when he joined them. "How's it feel to be picked last, Valenti?"

"Novel," Kyle shot back with a matching smirk.

"Boys," Liz sighed, but she was smiling. "Let's sit on the floor with the glass in the middle. If we have our knees touching, and then we hold hands on the glass itself, that should work."

They arranged themselves as per Liz's instructions, Kyle and Liz on each side of Michael with Noah sat across. Once in place, Isobel deposited the largest glass fragment in the space left open in the centre of their legs.

One by one, they placed their hands on the glass, right hand on top of the left of the person before. As the anchor, Michael went last.

He knew this was important, but the mood felt grave and Michael wasn't keen on keeping things too serious no matter how important they were. He offered a dirty grin. "Liz, you should've been packing. We could have had a circle jerk, too."

"Michael!" Ooooo, sister and sister-in-law to be, in stereo. He laughed, conscious that Kyle and Noah were both snickering and the somber overlay had dissipated. Goal met.

"We're fine, Isobel. I will keep these jokers in line," Liz glanced heavenward then levelled a look at Michael. "Can we do this now?"

"I'm good," he shrugged. Nodding at Noah and Kyle, "You guys good?"

They nodded in response and Michael's gaze moved back to Liz. "We're all yours, Ortecho. Lead the way."

Alex had watched the proceedings with a half smile. As the other group fell silent, he turned his attention back to his group to find Max and Maria grinning at him. "What?"

"That's your boyfriend," Max told him.
"Uh-huh, and he's your brother," Alex reminded.

Maria held up a hand. "I'm just his bartender."

"Now we're all clear how we're related to Guerin, shall we get on with it?" Alex raised an eyebrow.

Maria put both hands on the square glass fragment in Max's lap. "Let's kumbaya it."

Alex and Max shook their heads but followed suit, layering their hands with Maria's and each other's.

"Do you want to set the breathing pace?" Alex asked Max. "It's kind of your rodeo."

"As long as there are no tennis balls involved," he quipped, and Alex laughed.

"I'm unarmed, honest."

Smiling, Max nodded and began to breathe in a slow, even tempo. Alex watched as Maria fell in sync with him then modulated his own rhythm to match.

Within minutes, Alex felt the world shimmer and found himself standing on the patio with Max and Maria, the soft glow of starlight defining the edges of the desert.

{It's a full moon tonight.} Maria's confusion at the mismatch came through clearly.

Alex sighed. {Me, I think. This looks like the night Guerin broke that glass.}

{Michael broke a glass out here? I don't remember him saying anything about it.} Max frowned.

{It was months ago. If you haven't missed it by now, it can't be that big a deal.}

{Alex, is there any part of the memory you would be comfortable sharing? I know the conversation got really personal, but from before that, maybe? So we can see if this setting is from you?} Maria laid a hand on his arm and offered a smile.

{Um, well, the actual glass breakage isn't personal. And it was definitely an alien method, so... Yeah, I can try.} Alex gave both of them a stern look. {But only if you promise to back away as soon as the snow globe disappears.}

{Snow globe?}

Alex laughed. {You'll see what I mean.}

He took a couple of deep breaths to settle himself and bring the memory to the forefront, and then led the others around the corner of the house, stopping once the two men stood together were clearly visible.

"I didn't mean to be so explicit in front of Liz." Michael's voice sounded the same as Alex remembered, sharp with grief and regret.

His own sounded compassionate. "It's okay. None of this is easy. For anyone."

They listened to Michael's terse agreement and watched as he played with the empty drinking glass in his hands. Then it went sailing through the air, towards the desert, and exploded, the shards contained in an invisible bubble that floated to the ground.
“What was that for?” Alex heard himself ask, and in the here and now of this observational exercise, he grasped Maria's and Max's hands and pulled them back to the patio, out of sight and earshot before the kiss and the confession Alex would never forget.

[That was like a little force field! It was so cool!] Maria enthused.

Max nodded. [It was cool. I don't think I've seen Michael do anything with a force field before.]

[He's started practicing with it more lately. The sphere is apparently the easiest way to do it; something about the internal versus external pressures balancing each other in a way unique to the shape.] Alex shrugged.

[You tune out past a certain point too, huh?] Max's smile was fond.

[Yeah, if he gets too deep into the mechanics or I get too deep into the coding, we kind of lose each other. Math is where we intersect.]

Maria giggled. [You guys must have the most boring conversations on the planet.]

[Matter of perspective, Maria. We keep each other entertained.]

[But is that really about having conversations?] Max teased.

[Funny, Evans. I'm sure you've spent a lot of time with science talk. I know Liz and her ability to turn anything into an experiment.]

Alex wasn't expecting the fiery blush suffusing Max's face, though perhaps he should have been. He ignored Maria's giggles and patted the taller man's shoulder. [Sorry, dude.]

Max just made a face and shrugged. Alex knew they were all bound to be embarrassed during this process at some point. Well, except Maria, maybe. He wasn't sure it was possible to embarrass her.

[So do we need to do anything else, or are we happy this worked? It's basically the same as with only Isobel, aside from the lack of super saturated colours.] Maria looked back and forth between them.

[Super saturated colours?] Alex enquired.

[Yes. When she does it, everything is, like, brighter than it would be naturally. But here it looks normal.] Maria waved at the landscape.

[Can't say I ever noticed a difference. Have you, Max?]

[Not that I recall, no.]

Maria sighed. [Well, there is one. You'll have to take my word for it.]

[Happy to, even before you factor in that we can't lie in this environment. You know me and colours.]

[I do, Alex, I do.] Her dramatic sigh made him laugh.

[That may be unique to Isobel. I'm not any more likely than Alex is to view things as colourfully as she does, I'm afraid.]

[A'right then, let's rehome our minds. We need to go get into the same positions our physical bodies
are in, right? So just go inside and cuddle up on the couch?}

Alex nodded and the three of them did exactly that, ending up pressed together in a row with all hands on the glass. He and Maria let go first, then Max put the fragment on the coffee table.

The discomfort of the full body pins and needles sensation faded quickly enough and soon they were blinking in the firelight, Isobel stood in front of them examining their faces, and the other group still sat cross-legged in a square, connected and absent from the room as yet.

Michael opened his eyes to blazing sunshine, which was a neat trick given it was after nine o'clock at night in the autumn. His hands were grasped by Liz and Kyle. They, too, had a look round the patio and so did Noah, before the four of them let go of each other.

{Was someone cold?} Michael grinned.

{Me!} Liz laughed. {Too bad this won't actually warm up my body.}

{So, what now? We need to look at someone's memory? I don't think I've been here at noon before.} Kyle frowned at the sun overhead.

{Maybe let me? I can think of one that isn't too personal.} Noah paused and smiled. {Not in the explicit sense, anyway.}

{That sounds good.} Liz confirmed, and Michael nodded in agreement. It had to be one of the three of them.

{Okay, um, let me try this.} Noah seemed a little apprehensive but game, his forehead creasing as he concentrated.

Michael turned at the sound of a car coming up the driveway, not recognising the vehicle. Nice, though; expensive. He and the others watched it pull in beside Max's old Jeep and a younger Noah got out, smoothing down his linen slacks and straightening the collar of his button-down shirt, obviously nervous.

Michael thought something looked familiar but it was the next move that jogged his own memory, when Noah retrieved a bouquet from the back seat. {Dude. You got us the same flowers?}

Present-day Noah chuckled beside him. Liz and Kyle gave him expectant looks. Michael smiled, only sort of paying attention to the young man walking to the front door. {This is when you asked Max and I about proposing to Izzy, right? I remember the daisies. Only time anyone's given me flowers.} He laughed. {Noah had to explain what to do with them.}

{I was anxious enough without trying to figure out two different unromantic bouquets. Daisies seemed safe.}

{Yeah, they were pretty.}

The group watched Max open the door and welcome Noah into his house. Liz stepped forward and Kyle put a hand on her arm to stop her.

{I think we've seen enough to verify it's the real deal. No need to watch the man sweat.}

Michael nodded. {Agreed.}

{Okay, then we can consider this a success, and go find our bodies.} Liz smiled, and Michael
sketched a salute to her.

,Yes, ma'am.]

She rolled her eyes and led them into the house, to replicate their seated circle on the floor. Michael mused to himself that at some point, Liz had apparently landed on his internal list of people he considered to have worthwhile enough authority to snark at.

Which she validated again now, pulling the group through the pins and needles stage until Michael let go of the glass, leaning back with a groan until he was flat on his back on the floor, his legs unfolding. "Fuck, why does all this connection crap require sitting fucking still?"

His explosive sigh had the room laughing.

[end chapter forty-four]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!

And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
"Anyone else want a refill while I'm up?" Michael offered, rising to his feet and collecting Alex's juice glass, already rewarded with his smile.

"I think I can manage my own," Isobel waved at the open bottle of wine on the coffee table.

Michael took that as a challenge and topped up her wineglass, along with the others on the table. He winked at Isobel when he put the bottle down. "Don't say I never did anything for you."

She laughed and rolled her eyes. "Yes, you're ever so helpful, Michael."

He grinned as he started towards the kitchen then stopped dead at the pounding on Max's front door. He looked at Max, who shook his head - nobody else was expected - and deposited the glasses on the breakfast bar before going to the door.

As he reached it, there was another round of knocking, accompanied this time by yelling in a voice he knew.

"Evans! I know you're home. Open the goddamned door!"

Michael did and Jenna stumbled into the house, one hand pressed tight to the fresh bloodstain on her side. He grabbed her free arm and passed her to Kyle, who had materialised beside him as if his medical degree had come with an internal alarm that preceded even the sight of blood.

Sticking his head out the door, Michael took a good look around. The only change was Jenna's haphazardly parked car right there. Even he knew enough strategy to know it was a problem to have something capable of providing cover sitting so close to the house. He called over his shoulder, "Cameron, where's your keys?"

"Here," she sounded farther away and he turned to see her being settled on the couch. Jenna passed the keys to Kyle.

"Guerin, think fast." They jangled as they sailed through the air and Michael snatched them as soon as they were in reach.

"Gotta move the car, be right back."

Alex watched him shut the door behind himself; he couldn't hear it, but he knew Michael would have locked it, too. And would unlock it just as easily in a few minutes.

He returned his focus to Max - specifically to keeping Max out of the way while Kyle examined
"Let me, I can help," Max protested, glaring at Alex.

"No. Let Kyle handle it. It's not life-threatening."

"How would you know?" The words were bitten out, angry, but Alex knew they masked fear.

"I've got basic field medical training and I've been shot at a lot. Way more than you have, Evans," he controlled the urge to snap at him, keeping his voice calm and steady.

Jenna's hoarse, "You," pulled Alex's attention to her, to find her eyes fluttering open to fix on him.

"Hey there. We met before, at the junkyard. Guerin introduced us. I'm Alex."

She snorted a weak laugh. "Yeah, Manes, I know you. Your father is a fucking lunatic."

His body seemed to freeze solid, icy cold spreading through him. "Did he shoot you?"

"Wasn't him, no. It was the guy with him, in that damn bunker." She blinked at him, obviously clear-headed despite the pain. "I assume you know about that, yeah? And the project?"

"We do. Can you describe the person who did shoot you?" Alex needed to get as much information as he could from Jenna while she was still lucid.

"Yeah, uh, about your height but a little older than you. At least part Native American. Army fatigues, which seemed weird because you're both Air Force."

"Oh this just gets better and better," Alex clenched his jaw. "He got Flint to drink the Kool-Aid, too."

"Your brother?" Liz asked, and Alex glanced to the side, noting how she hovered near Max. Good; he could count on Liz to keep her boyfriend under control.

"Yep. Next one up. Supposed to be in Germany," his tone was flat, cold. "The elder two are both Air Force. Also supposedly overseas, but if Flint's here, who the hell knows."

"You need stitches," Kyle broke into the conversation, calm and soothing. "The good news is, the bullet went right on through the fleshy part of the upper hip. No major damage. I just need to clean it thoroughly and stitch it closed."

"What's the bad news?"

Kyle winked at her. "The scar will be visible in a bikini."

Jenna chuckled, "Won't be the first one."

"Can you do it here, Kyle? We have the supplies and I can sterilise everything for you," Liz interjected.

"Unless nobody mentioned it to me, we don't have anaesthesia, though," Kyle sounded doubtful.

Alex captured Jenna's gaze. "Is there anything else you can tell me about what you saw in the bunker tonight? Anything important?"

"Yeah." Her mouth twisted in a wry smile and he knew exactly what decision she would make. Her
gaze moved past Alex to a point behind him. "Evans, get me that bottle of top shelf whiskey you keep in the back of the cupboard. Consider it your peace offering for not telling me you're a different species."

"What?" Max gasped. He obviously hadn't connected the dots that Jenna would know everything from Project Shepherd, or near enough, and he was frozen in shock.

"I'll get it," Michael stated. He hadn't said anything when he'd come back inside, not wanting to interrupt, but Max was clearly thrown that his partner knew the truth about him.

Upon handing the bottle to Jenna, Michael smiled at Alex. "By the way, I also doused the fire, activated the perimeter alarms, and turned on all the exterior lights. You want the TV on?"

"You need to ask?" Alex arched one eyebrow, fighting the urge to smile in return. He couldn't afford softer emotions. Hopefully Michael would understand that; either way, Alex would make it up to him later. Because what he was doing now would help ensure there was a later.

Michael laughed, "No, not really." He knew what Alex was doing - what he needed to do. Michael had seen it before and he understood it wasn't personal. "I know how your brain works."

Alex did smile briefly at that, then turned his attention back to Jenna. Kyle had helped her adjust position so she could swig from the bottle and he still had the necessary room to work. She took a few long swallows, her eyes on Alex. "I came straight here instead of the hospital because they're planning to hit you tonight. Or they were. It's possible my escaping has changed the plan; they had to guess I'd warn you."

Alex nodded, gaze flicking to the CCTV footage on Max's big screen TV. No sign of anyone yet. "I have 360 degree surveillance cameras set up on the property. We'll see them coming." He regarded her as she drank some more, getting herself ready for the moment when Liz would return with sterile tools. Bluntly, "Why'd he shoot you? You've obviously been cooperating with the project."

Jenna grimaced. "I objected to civilian casualties."

"So he does intend to kill all eight of us," Alex spoke quietly, almost meditatively, letting the confirmation of what he'd already known to be truth sink into his bones. The group around them murmured, in varying states of surprise through shock, and Alex held up a hand for silence.

"Look, we've known this was coming. It's why we stopped hiding that we were congregating at Max's, so we'd make an irresistible target. You can all see the live surveillance footage on the TV over there. You know every window has bulletproof lamination," he raised his eyebrows at Jenna's evident surprise. "On that note, Noah, Iz, go check all the windows and doors are closed and locked, and the blinds down."

Alex watched them leave the room then returned to Jenna. "What did he have on you? I'm assuming you were blackmailed." He compressed his lips into a thin line.

"My sister. She's in a military correctional facility. My fault; I didn't back her up when she needed me." Guilt oozed from her. "Chief Master Sargent Manes wanted access to the Sheriff's Department records, in return for moving her to minimum security. I cherry-picked the information as much as possible, but," she shrugged.

"No," Alex gave a single, sharp shake of his head, underscoring the word. "In return for not locking her in Leavenworth and throwing away the key."

"Yeah," her voice was soft, tired. Scared, though Alex suspected she wouldn't have admitted it.
He continued to watch Jenna as Liz laid out the sterilised tools on a clean towel on the coffee table. "What else was in the bunker? What was important enough to risk you getting shot and your sister getting shafted?"

Jenna blinked at him, her speech coming slower even as Kyle began to stitch her wound. She hissed in pain and swallowed more whiskey.

"Jenna. What did you see?"

"Cameron," she insisted. "Or Cam for short."

Okay, good, that indicated a rapport. "Cameron it is. You can call me Alex. Or if you feel the need for formality, Captain."

He didn't dissuade her from saluting, awkward as it was; he knew better. In the current situation, it would be a source of comfort.

Especially since Alex outranked his father.

"Tell me what you saw, Cameron."

"Anti aircraft missile. With launcher. Maps of - ah! - here. When I came into the main room, they were - they were talking about," she paused to drink more whiskey and Alex knew she was fading fast. Jenna took a deep breath and plowed on, "Blowing up the house. This house. Tonight."

"Did you get a good look at the missile? Digital or analogue guidance system, even?" Alex kept his voice calm, ignoring everyone and everything else to focus on Jenna.

"Not that good. Had lights, though, green LED looking, and a control panel like an iPad. S'all I saw," the apology clear despite the way her words began to slur.

"Thank you, Cam, that's helpful. Let Dr. Valenti take care of you now, okay?" He offered a quick smile. "When you're all healed up, I'll buy you a bikini."

Jenna laughed, and then groaned. "Ow, don't make me laugh. Aren't you gay?"

Apparently her characteristic blunt speech had even less of a filter when she'd been drinking. Alex just closed his eyes for a moment before answering, "Yeah, but what does that have to do with swimming or shopping?"

"He's actually a really good shopping buddy," Maria piped up. "Plus, if he tells you something looks great, you know it isn't because he wants to see it on the floor."

"Thanks for the ringing endorsement, Maria." Sarcasm dripped from his voice.

"She's not wrong, though," Liz smiled at him.

Alex rolled his eyes and shrugged it off. It didn't matter now. He addressed Kyle, "You got everything you need to finish this?"

Nodding slowly as he sewed, Kyle confirmed, "Yeah, I'm good, Alex, thanks."

"All right. Yell if that changes." Alex walked over to the padded bench seat by the door, suppressing a groan as he sat down. He should've gotten off his feet a while ago. He beckoned, "Guerin, Izzy, Max, come here, please."
Alex scanned the room as the three approached, noting what everyone else was up to. Liz was sticking close to Kyle and Jenna, ready to provide an extra pair of hands or additional supplies. Noah was glued to the TV like his favourite sports team was playing. Maria was dividing her attention between the TV, the medical procedure in progress on the couch, and him. He gave her a little nod and she responded with an equally tiny smile.

"What's the plan?" Michael asked point blank, sitting beside Alex. "Do you know what kind of missile it is?"

"Not yet," Alex admitted. His gaze travelled across the three of them and settled on Max. "First, I need to ask you - each of you - if you're willing and able to follow my lead, including all decisions on when, where, and how to use your powers in this situation." He didn't feel any spike in emotion, positive or negative, and continued, "I may tell you to use them to defend, or to attack, and I need you to confirm to me now that you will do as you're told."

Michael acquiesced easily, "You know I will." It wasn't a new decision for him, though, more an expansion of the potential scenarios he and Alex had already discussed on several occasions. He watched his siblings, cataloguing the expressions crossing each of their faces.

Predictably, Isobel answered first. "I can do that, yes. I trust you." Michael caught Alex's nod out of the corner of his eye but kept his own gaze on his brother.

Alex simply waited, maintaining eye contact with Max but without any aggression to it. Eventually Max cleared his throat and spoke. "Yeah. It helps that I'm still connected to you. Lightly, but it's there. And I can feel that you know what you're doing, which," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I gotta admit, I'm out of my depth here. My police training is good, but it's not the same thing as combat. And, well, nobody knows your father better than you."

Alex nodded. "An unfortunate truth. Thank you, all of you, for your trust." He glanced at Michael and Isobel, including them in the statement, then refocused on Max.

"What would you need to be able to blow the power grid again?"

[end chapter forty-five]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!

And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas

P.S. I'm going to participate in Alex Manes Appreciation Week on Tumblr, starting 4 May. Any actual fic I'll cross post to AO3 but I thought I'd mention it anyway.
"You want me to cause another blackout? Are you serious?"

Alex could feel Max getting agitated as well as see it, which was a little strange. Putting more people into the connection seemed to have strengthened or elongated the aftereffects. Maybe both. He could use that to his advantage, though, and projected as much serenity as he could.

"That isn't what I asked, Max. I want to understand what you'd need to build up to that level of power. Do you know?"

Michael couldn't feel what Alex was projecting, not in the emotional leakage sense, but his expression was familiar and Michael could see the effect on Max, simmering right down. It impressed him. He offered, "Max was kinda, off, for a while after healing Liz. We figured he absorbed some sort of negative energy because he kept raging out."

"Raging out?" Alex queried.

"Yeah," Max nodded. "These bursts of, like, intense anger. Destructive. I - I wasn't really in control of it." His voice dropped, barely audible. Shame hit Alex in waves. "I nearly killed Wyatt. I would have, if Michael hadn't stopped me."

Michael shrugged. "Least I could do was throw you across the alley after you punched me."

"You were intimidating Liz!"

"Oh, please," Michael scoffed. "We were trying to intimidate Liz. Unfortunately, while Isobel can be utterly terrifying in certain circumstances, I'm not that scary and your girlfriend is a badass."

"I heard that!" Liz called out and Michael grinned.

"I rest my case."

"Hm," Alex hummed to himself as he considered the information. He cocked his head. "Isobel, do you also get a power boost if you're angry? I know Guerin does."

"Not like they do. My abilities aren't physical the same way. But, having strong emotions of any kind does help smooth the path of influence. It doesn't have to be anger," she answered slowly. "Now I'm thinking about it, I believe it helps the most if the strong emotion I'm feeling is similar to how I'd expect the... Well, the target person, to feel if they follow my suggestion."

"Makes sense," Alex nodded. "I'm not sure how easy it would be to harness that at short notice. Do you think you'd be able to channel or possibly amplify rage from Guerin and Max, if you were all connected?"

Michael raised his eyebrows at the whole notion. "You think she could handle that?"

"She' is right here, Michael," Isobel bit out. "Stop talking over me."
"The way I see it," Alex stepped in before they could start arguing, "Isobel's been handling the both of you all your lives. She's more than capable enough. And I also think having you all connected will shore up her defenses against Violet. Present her with a united front she can't crack."

Max shook his head. "What if you're wrong and she still manages to take control of Iz? Then she'd get all of us."

Alex shrugged. "Then we'll all die a little earlier and nastier than we will if a missile hits the house."

"You are such a fucking ray of sunshine, Manes," Kyle snorted from beside the couch.

"Fuck you, too, Kyle," Alex returned easily, without heat. "As a medical professional, I thought you'd appreciate a clear, honest answer."

"Oh, I do. But your bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired."

Michael chuckled, "Probably because he's got a battlefield manner, not bedside."

"Touché," Alex conceded.

"Alex, is there any reason not to include humans in the connection?" Maria asked as she walked to their corner. "Couldn't we also add rage fuel?"

"That's an excellent question. Either of you tried something like that?" he addressed Isobel and Max. "In a twist of cruel irony, I've mostly tried to make Guerin less angry, so I have no personal data points."

His brows rose sharply when Max blushed and admitted, "It works fine with sex. That's not, I mean, obviously it isn't anger we share and amplify, but the principle should be the same."

"That's via handprint, though, Max - it might be a different kind of connection," Liz commented as she joined them, not seeming bothered by the topic.

"Seriously, Max?" Isobel rolled her eyes. "You give your girlfriend handprint orgasms?" Her tone made it clear the question was rhetorical, not a request for confirmation or details.

Alex was torn between amusement at Isobel's disgust and Max's embarrassment, and the all too distracting idea of trying it out with Michael. But as none of those reactions was productive, he brushed them all aside and focused on the facts.

"Max, could you put a handprint on Noah or Kyle? Maria and I are already linked to you from working with the glass, and Liz isn't a suitable test subject."

"I'll do it," Kyle decided. Alex noticed the same thing Kyle probably had: Noah seemed a little freaked out, probably because he and Max were basically brothers and they were talking about sharing something Max did, well, recreationally.

"Really?" Max didn't sound nearly as certain as Kyle had.

Alex looked over both of them and coolly enquired, "Do you two need a ruler or can you get on with it?"

Michael bit the inside of his lips so he didn't bust out laughing. The phrasing was parental but the tone was pure command, and the contrast suggested that Alex wasn't impressed by grown men acting like children. It was a lot funnier directed at someone else.
Effective, too. With no further delay, Kyle undid half the buttons of his shirt and Max placed his palm on the bared skin, a red glow emanating from the point of contact. It was hardly a new sight for Michael but it always awed him, just a little bit.

Both men kept their eyes closed as Max withdrew his hand. Kyle's expression suggested he felt the same as Michael did watching. When he did open his eyes, he looked up at Max, exhaling a long, "Whoa."

"It is different," Liz declared.

"Yeah," Kyle nodded. "Connecting through the glass is like, like," he groped for words, smiling when he continued, "like being handcuffed together. And then this, the handprint, is like full-body bondage."

Alex regarded him, eyebrows raising sharply. "Bondage, Kyle? Really?" He was further taken aback when Max started giggling. What the hell? Alex looked at Michael, who gave him a wide-eyed shrug; he clearly had no idea, either.

"Sorry," Kyle managed, sporting a huge grin. "It was a med school thing. Analogy. Whatever." He pointed at Max. "The details of which, he is going to take to his grave."

"Unless it ends up in the group consciousness," Maria reminded him.

"Well, yeah. Unless that happens. And then I'll swear the lot of you to secrecy," he laughed.

"Given your reactions," Alex steered the discussion back onto its track, "I'm guessing the connection is qualitatively and quantitatively different, is that correct?"

"Yes," Kyle nodded, and Max echoed it, calmer now. "Good, thank you. Max, I want you to use your EMP power while trying to pull energy from Kyle through the connection. Do you have a small lamp or something that you aren't attached to?"

"I'll get the one from the guest room," Isobel volunteered. "It could do with being replaced anyway."

Max sighed and waved at Isobel. "What she said."

Michael chuckled. You didn't need to be Maria to foresee some redecorating in Max's near future. He focused on Alex when his boyfriend asked him, "Can you slap a forcefield around the lamp if Max blows it up?"

"Should be doable, yeah." Michael frowned, thinking it through. "The hard part is the speed. When I'm doing the exploding, my powers are already inside the field, right? They're compatible. Like water passing through a membrane in osmosis. But Max's powers aren't water, so they won't pass through the same way. I'd have to leave an opening for him to access, and try to snap it closed at the moment of impact. That's gonna be complicated."

Alex watched him think, the firing synapses practically visible. He loved being able to engage Michael this way, giving him the encouragement and space to let his imagination rip, and then helping him refine the raw materials he generated. Theirs was a deeply satisfying partnership on so many levels.

He knew the second it clicked for Michael by the way his face brightened, and Alex couldn't help but mirror his smile.
"A shield would work better. Sort of a half sphere, with the people on the inside, protected, and the lamp outside. Plus Max outside too, sorry bro," he gestured an apology. "Might make a hell of a mess still but it wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Good enough, thanks, Guerin. Max, you can hold up a duvet in front of you and cover your face as soon as the bulb pops." He saw the dubious look and chuckled. "It's not dignified looking but it's actually a pretty effective barrier."

"I'll get that, too," Isobel announced.

"Thanks, Izzy. Okay, Guerin, when you create the shield, I want you to try to pull energy from Noah. You've still got the glass connection and I need some idea of what the difference is."

"Alex, I think he should pull from me," Liz countered. "It's under different circumstances, obviously, but I have experience with a handprint connection, so I'm best placed to evaluate the nuances."

Alex considered it. "I was thinking Noah specifically because he doesn't have that experience, so he could provide a purer analysis. But you also have extensive experience in the compare and contrast part of things, and you can articulate those results easily, so, yes. I agree." He pointed at Michael with his chin. "Okay, Guerin, pull from Liz instead."

Michael simply saluted, earning himself narrowed eyes and a sour look. He shrugged and went to grab the lamp from Isobel, setting up in what he figured to be the most easily defensible spot in Max's living room for what they were attempting, beside the large French doors.

Studying the floor, Michael suggested, "Let's all put shoes on. Then it won't matter if anyone steps on bits of glass."

"Good idea," Max jumped on it and Michael glanced at him, realising he was nervous. No; Michael was feeling his nervousness. He looked at Kyle, who was fidgety for perhaps the first time in Michael's experience of him.

"Hey, Valenti, how you feeling?" he enquired.

"Uh, anxious, I guess. It's kind of weird, though."

"Yeah, because it isn't yours. It's Max." He raised his eyebrows at Alex. "I'm getting an echo, too, through Kyle."

"Oh, wow, that's so interesting," Liz exclaimed, and Alex bit back a smile. In many situations, he'd get Liz off the science train, but right now that was exactly the mindset he wanted her in.

"Let's do this," Alex addressed the group, and everyone filed into their designated locations. Max stood against the French doors, holding the duvet loosely, waiting for Michael's signal.

Michael made sure he knew exactly where everyone was, then took Liz's hand and began constructing the shield. He couldn't tell if her energy was bolstering his or not; that would be a question for afterwards.

When Michael was happy with the shield, he gave Max a thumbs-up, and braced for impact.

Max drew the duvet up to his shoulders with his left hand, holding his right outstretched towards the lamp. His forehead creased as he concentrated.

A shower of sparks became a loud pop became a screech of metal as the entire lamp blew apart. Max
had the duvet all the way up now and Michael spot-repaired the shield where necessary, holding it firm. His hand was warm where Liz clutched it and when he looked down, a faint glow emanated from their entwined fingers.

He caught Liz's attention and jerked his head at their hands, grinning as her mouth dropped open. He left her to her observations and refocused on the shield, waiting until a couple of minutes passed with no new tiny impact points, and then he let it dissipate. "Alright, people, all clear."

"Holy shit," Kyle summed it up. "I think we can call that a successful experiment!"

"Agreed," Max smiled. "I was definitely getting a boost from him. Enough of one that I didn't fully account for the extra. Hence the total destruction." He made a rueful face at the unrecognisable pieces scattered around him.

"Max, put the duvet glass side down over the worst of the mess and let's all have a seat again," Alex instructed, following up the words by sinking into the chair closest to Jenna.

Michael detoured to the kitchen first, pulling out a bottle of acetone and taking a few mouthfuls. He recapped it and brought it with him. "Max, you nauseated at all?"

"No, thanks. It wasn't a heavy power drain activity, not like what you were doing."

"Drink some anyway - you, too, Isobel. You'll need it later," Alex told them. He looked back and forth between Kyle and Liz. "Either of you feeling it? Kyle, do you have any dramamine? It might be a good idea for us humans to get it in ahead of time, too."

"Yeah, there's some in the first aid kit."

"My turn to fetch," Maria smiled.

"Does this mean you want me to handprint everyone?" Max asked. "Link us all up at maximum strength?"

Alex met his eyes, searching for truth. "Yes. You up for it?"

His expression was complicated but his gaze was clear and strong. "I can do that."

"Good," Alex smiled. "I'll get you to start with the other humans, then Isobel and Michael, in that order, and finally me."

"Hey, Captain," Jenna interjected. "Dial me into this conference call, too."

Alex raised his eyebrows at her demand. "I don't know if that's a good idea, Cam. Kyle, your professional opinion, please?"

Kyle shrugged. "It's just a flesh wound. It might hurt like a bitch but it won't endanger her health."

"If I'm giving Cam a handprint anyway, can't I just heal her?" Max wanted to know.

"No, Evans, you can't heal me. I'm evidence, dumbass," Jenna asserted. "If I get the chance to prosecute that dick for attempted murder, I need the bullet hole as well as the eyewitness testimony."

"There's your answer, Max," Alex couldn't help the laugh. "Your partner and her doctor have spoken."

"Thank you," Jenna angled her head to look at Alex and he reached to pat her shoulder.
"I'm not going to bench you if you're medically fit."

Michael had been turning Alex's words over in his mind about the order of adding people in. Something about it niggled at him, and not just the slip into his first name.

"Alex. I get why Iz then me. They have, like, a permalink between them, so it's more like a door that's ajar being pushed wide open. And Max and I, it's like a closed door that needs the doorknob turned before it can open.

"But for the rest of you, Max has to create a new door before he can open it. So why you after us? Just because you're calling the shots?"

Alex sighed; he should have known Michael would pick up on that. "No, it's not that, or not only that. It's..." he paused, looking around the room. Max was the only one who didn't meet his eyes, busy marking each human.

"This group of people - you, all of you, are my family. From Liz on my first day of school, to Cameron joining today," Alex squeezed the hand Jenna offered him. And my family is in danger because of the evil nutjob who contributed his DNA to my body."

"That doesn't make it your responsibility, though, him being your father," Maria objected.

"Doesn't it? Someone has to take it on. Me." Alex didn't leave room for questioning.

"There's more to it than that," Michael said slowly, working out the details in his head and staring at Alex. "We need a unifying factor, something to pull us together in harmony. So Max can gather the pooled energy, and Isobel can control the flow, and I can aim. Right?"

"Got it in one, Michael. Colour me impressed." Alex swallowed against the prickling sensation in his eyes. He could see Michael following the plan in his mind and when those beautiful hazel eyes widened in realisation, Alex smiled and shook his head, imploring Michael to keep quiet.

"Michael's right: we need a catalyst, something to bind us together and provide a sharp focus within the connection. And, well, it's like I said: this, here, you, are my chosen family. We have all hurt each other and people external to this room before; we have all been stupid and behaved badly at times. But at the core of it, everyone here is a good person. And that's why I will be the catalyst."

"Oh, Alex," Maria's voice was soft, loving; she'd clearly picked up on his emotions from the glass connection and her sensitivity to him, and knew where he was going with this.

So did Michael, and Alex locked gazes with him as he finished the explanations.

"You're all good people, and none of you would abide child abuse. I happen to have decades of memories of abuse, at the hands of the man we're trying to take down."

Alex inhaled deeply and exhaled into a fierce smile, defiant and strong. "I will be the rage fuel."

[end chapter forty-six]
Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!

And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.
~Tas
Rage and Love

Chapter Notes

If you read the previous chapter, you already know this one comes with a trigger warning. The italicised section at the beginning is where Alex's memories are, so you can skip down to the normal text if you need to.

~Tas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * * * *

Alex started before the beginning.

Behaviour patterns he'd observed and absorbed as a young child. Watching his father interact with his brothers. His brothers interacting with each other. The 'Command and Control' mindset cascading down the generations.

The way his mother flinched sometimes when Alex hugged her, and passed it off as nothing. Finger-shaped bruises showing on her arm when her sleeve slipped while she cut his hair, startling her into hacking off a big chunk. She'd had to go really short to disguise the error and Alex had hated it so much, he'd refused to cut his hair at all for the next several years.

She was gone by then, self-preservation overriding all maternal instincts, and Alex had been deemed big enough to become a full-fledged member of the household. Aged 10.

It meant meal prep when he got home from school, and calisthenics before homework. A five mile run every morning before he was allowed breakfast.

Rough-housing with his brothers. Stupid, silly stuff when it was just the four of them. But when Dad was watching, it got mean, each of them scrambling for his approval.

As the youngest, and therefore also the smallest, Alex never won.

The summer he was 13, everything changed.

Alex didn't understand why at first. After three years as a solid quintet of men, however fucked up the family dynamics, he found himself standing outside their closed ranks.

Then he got on a first name basis with daily pain.

Glancing at a boy his age earned him a bruising grip to his upper arms while his father screamed at him, followed by a shove into the wall when the lecture was over.

His regular T-shirts didn't cover the marks and Alex began layering, long sleeves underneath them that he could pull over his wrists when necessary.

The time Alex stayed after school to talk to a teacher about an assignment and got home late, throwing off the schedule for making dinner, he finally understood the root problem. Mr. Collins was nice, he'd been helpful with Alex's questions, but he was a young teacher and the accusations flung
at Alex about his perverted nature corrupting innocent people and how dare Alex inflict himself on an authority figure and who did Alex think he was, anyway, all made a sick kind of sense.

It wasn't the teacher his father blamed. Not that anything had actually been done, by anyone. But the furious words hit Alex's ears and psyche with as much force as the belt hit his back, opening a trickle of internal bleeding in his mind that Alex still struggled with sometimes.

The one saving grace was, Alex's two best friends were pretty girls. Kyle had already cut himself out of the picture, but Alex was allowed to spend time with Liz and Maria, probably in the hopes that he'd date one of them.

When he landed in the ER two towns over with broken ribs, 16-year-old Alex had had enough. Three years of trying to conform to what Dad wanted. Three years of trying to be someone he wasn't. His efforts hadn't stopped or even slowed the punishments; he wasn't entirely sure his father cared if Alex behaved, because what he wanted was for Alex to change the essence of who he was as a person.

And that simply wasn't possible.

He recruited Maria to shop with him and Liz to figure out his hair, spending the summer reinventing himself. Learning how to use hair gel and eyeliner. Grateful for their whole-hearted support and their offers of a refuge when he needed one.

It didn't change what went on at home. The hits still landed, and Alex had learned to let them. But if he were being punished anyway, he might as well do the crime.

Alex broke the flow there, unwilling to share the private moments that had followed his rebellion, or his first memories of time with Michael. He kept his eyes closed, breathing deep and even, nose pressed to the underside of Michael's jaw, curled against his boyfriend's chest with his arms wrapped around him.

Michael's only movement was his eyelids, opening to look around the room. The others were in some stage of shaking loose from the flood of images and emotions.

He didn't need to do that, already intimately familiar with Alex's trauma, childhood and otherwise. So it wasn't surprising that of the others, Kyle regained his voice first, years of medical training giving him the tools to handle it.

"When I said you were the bravest person I knew, Alex, I didn't know the half of it."

Michael could feel the regular puffs of air as Alex exhaled against his throat, and he tightened his hold on Alex in a quick squeeze, a physical reminder that Michael was here and Alex was safe.

He could also feel the ribbons of rage in the room, undulating streamers joining each of them to Max. His brother gathered the ends in a metaphorical fist, holding tight as emotion pulsed along each swaying connection, filling Max with raw power.

The hair on the back of Michael's neck stood up as the air began to feel charged, like the darkening sky of oncoming thunderstorms.

"Max?" Liz asked before Michael could, and Alex stirred in his arms, shifting to view the room.

"I can feel it, Max. Are you able to contain the energy?" Alex enquired, calm now. Reliving those memories hadn't been fun, but he'd made it out alive from the real deal; the rehashed version didn't carry the same weight for him.
"Yes," Max spoke with certainty. It wasn't a false front - they would all know. There was no available space for untruths in the here and now. Not with the nine of them linked to each other on what felt like a cellular level.

"And I have acquired a target. Two, in fact," Isobel's tone was clipped, its very flatness the biggest indicator of her fury.

"Where, Iz?"

"About a mile away, out in the desert, and closing in slowly."

"Visual?" Alex asked, but she was already building it, sharing the unique viewpoint of her wandering mind. He squinted at the image floating there.

"Okay, that is Flint and Dad, and that's a SMAW." He was about to give a summary of what a Shoulder-Launched Multipurpose Assault Weapon actually was, but realised he could shorthand it with a little mental video of how it worked while he talked, "You wouldn't need more than the basic ammunition for this job. Max's house is not exactly a steel-reinforced tank. Range is half a kilometre so they'll be within that in a few minutes."

Michael focused on Isobel. "Izzy, can you tell if there are any life signs in the Project Shepherd bunker?"

He watched her forehead crease with the effort and finally she shook her head. "It's empty." Isobel locked eyes with him. "We thinking alternate target?"

"Needs to go somewhere," Michael nodded, seeing agreement in her gaze even as he felt it. "Max? You in?"

"I'm the battery here, Michael. You're the guidance system. I trust you."

Alex stood, moving off Michael's lap to give him space to work. He dropped back into the chair once vacated, wishing he could do more, but this next part was aliens only.

Michael knelt between Max and Isobel, facing them, the three of them gripping each other's hands. He looked at Max, conscious of the energy roiling in him, then they both looked at Isobel.

Spine straight and chin up, Isobel gave him a regal nod and tightened her fingers, drawing both of them into her mindscape.

The desert wind whipped Michael's hair in the near darkness. Full moon night but it had clouded over and the occasional break in coverage didn't add anything useful. He stood with his siblings, watching the two men move.

By the time the Manes men reached target range, Michael probably could have powered this endeavour all on his own. Yet he felt cool and collected, committed to the plan.

{I'm draining it off you as you produce it.} Max's explanation made sense and Michael sent a wave of gratitude his way, too.

They watched Flint hoist the SMAW into place on his shoulder, Jesse checking everything over, preparatory to firing.

Power pooled among the three aliens. To Michael, it looked electric blue, swirling in eddies that stabilised into twin spheres, one encasing each of Michael's hands. He used them to grasp the missile,
And then it was time, the roar of the launcher silent to their purely mental presence, and Michael bent the missile's trajectory to his will, following Isobel's path to their target. He aimed it straight down in the centre of the main building and let go.

The resulting blast went through him but Michael didn't feel it, incorporeal as he was. Energy still pulsed through him from Max, their stores not yet exhausted, and Michael raised his hands to loose the remainder in blue fire, a circle of destruction radiating out from the bunker to demolish the entire site.

Michael's personal energy went with it, burning abandoned buildings in a twisted echo of his deepest fears, and only the bond tethering him to Max and Isobel kept him from being drawn into the same fire. He could feel Isobel pulling, using her path to drag his sorry ass back to his body.

He had enough time to open his eyes and understand they had succeeded, and then Michael passed out.

[end chapter forty-seven]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!

And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
"Watch his head!"

Liz moved the fastest, diving in between Michael and the coffee table before his limp form smacked into it. She grunted at the impact. "He's heavier than he looks."

"He's deadweight right now," Kyle spoke as he helped Liz lay Michael flat on the floor then began examining him.

Alex wanted to hover, but Michael was clearly breathing and the mission wasn't over. He approached Max and Isobel from the far side.

"You two all right? Isobel, would you be able to see if Dad and Flint are where you left them? Do you have enough juice left for that?"

"Yes, I can do that." He didn't expect her to take his hand but she did and Alex let himself be pulled along.

The only sign of his blood relatives was the scorched earth in the wake of firing the SMAW. No footprints to indicate which direction they'd taken but it didn't matter.

Alex had safeguards and surveillance in place if they decided to approach the house for a firefight, and if they left off for now, they'd return to a base of operations which had been burned to the ground, and a whole lot of questions from the higher-ups.

For tonight, he could breathe easy.

Abruptly back in his body, Alex swayed, off balance from the rough re-entry. Isobel tightened her hold on his hand and Max grabbed his other arm, keeping him upright between them.

"Sorry, I ran out of go," Isobel apologised.

"It's fine, truly," Alex shook his head. "Thanks for the ride - it was good to see for myself."

"Guerin seems okay, Alex. I think he's got the same problem, ran out of energy resources," Kyle looked up from where he knelted by Michael's head.

"He threw everything he had at the Project Shepherd site," Max nodded. "Maybe even more than he meant to. It should replenish itself soon enough."

Alex couldn't help the small, fond smile or the exasperation as he looked over at Michael's supine
body. Softly, "When he commits to something, he goes all in."

"That he does," Max agreed, patting Alex's arm before he let go.

"Liz, you up to helping me shift him to the guest room? He doesn't need help sleeping it off."

"Yep. Ladder carry?" she asked. At Kyle's nod, the two of them got hold of Michael's arms and legs and picked him up.

Liz shot Alex a grin. "Last time I got recruited to do this, it was supposed to be for you."

Alex remembered. "I wasn't unconscious, though."

"No, you were being a stubborn bitch," Maria informed him, shrugging at his eye roll, unrepentant. "I'll turn down the bed, guys."

Sitting in one of the newly vacated chairs, Alex looked at the other humans in the room, gaze travelling between Jenna and Noah. "How're you two? Feeling all right?"

Noah nodded. "Tired, more than anything else. And," he paused, giving a tentative smile, "I'd really like to hug you."

"Who, me?" Not a reaction Alex had expected but not one he was opposed to, either. It was nice to be asked. He stood up and beckoned, "Well, c'mere, then."

Alex felt very young pulled into a hug with Noah's tall, slender body and it settled both of them. He squeezed Noah's shoulder with a smile when they disengaged.

"Sit in the biggest chair, baby, I need some of that," Isobel instructed and they all laughed.

"Cam?" Alex raised an eyebrow, figuring he might as well ask while he was up.

She gave him eyebrow right back. "Captain?"

He grinned; that was the 'hell no' he'd expected from her. "How's that bikini scar?"

"Fine. Still hurts, but no worse, and the lightshow was a good distraction."

"That's great news. You all right sleeping there tonight or do we need to get you somewhere?"

"We off the clock now? Not expecting more activity tonight?"

Alex shook his head. "No, they've gone to ground. Even if they'd had more weaponry, it went up in flames with the bunker. And no one is getting in or out of this house without me knowing about it."

She started nodding halfway through the explanation and now she looked tired. "Leave the TV on, then, and the crew bunking down in here can check the footage periodically."

"We can do that," Noah confirmed. "I think we're all staying the night, sorry Max."

"Don't apologise, man. Right now I want you all close by," Max smiled.

"We have blankets!" Maria announced, entering with a pile in her arms, Kyle and Liz right behind her with similar armfuls.

It looked like everything was under control, and Alex touched Max's arm, smiling when he glanced
"Do you mind if I ---"

"Go," he interrupted, putting a hand over Alex's briefly. "I got this. You take care of Michael."

"Thanks." Now Alex truly felt off duty. He was the better tactical leader, but he and Max had a decent power balance these days and Alex's skills weren't needed for this.

Actually, where this involved organising people, Max's skills probably weren't needed either, because Isobel would naturally step in and Max would let her.

The thought made Alex smile as he got ready for bed and slid in beside Michael. He looked peaceful, his breathing deep and even, his colour normal, his body heat its usual high level.

Alex nestled close, reassured by the steady thump of Michael's heartbeat, and fell asleep almost immediately.

* * * * *

It was still dark when Michael awoke. The first thing he noticed was the body sprawled over him. Alex liked to cuddle up but not like this; usually he needed a little distance, an open avenue to be able to move away easily even if he didn't use it. Right now, he was obliterating Michael's personal space and snoring about it.

Keeping as still as possible, Michael carefully freed one hand and stroked Alex's hair, wanting to touch him but not at the expense of his sleep. He supposed Alex had felt the same after Michael had fainted - that was undoubtedly why he was being an oversized pillow.

He let the events of the night play back in his head. All the talking and practicing and limit-learning with his powers had paid off in spades. Not just for Michael but in terms of Alex understanding what he could do, and how his abilities could be used. Max's and Isobel's, too.

It was so different to all the years of honing his telekinesis in private. Afraid of being caught by humans, obviously, but also by Max. Michael could admit that now. He'd craved approval from the only family he knew, even as he'd concealed large parts of himself and pushed them away when they got too close. Isobel less so than Max, but he'd still done it.

Hell, Michael hadn't explained why he'd been so drawn to Foster Ranch to Isobel until after he'd gotten kicked out of there by the Air Force.

And now he had one of the Air Force's finest drooling on his chest.

"I love you so fucking much," Michael whispered into the darkness. "You were amazing tonight."

"That's a nice sentiment to wake up to," Alex opined, lifting his head. He licked his bottom lip out of habit then looked down and laughed. "Oh, shit. Sorry," wiping away the moisture that had collected on Michael.

Michael chuckled. "I'm washable. I didn't mean to wake you, though."

"You didn't. It's four o'clock. I wanted to check on you, thought you might have regained consciousness by now."

"And people think I have freaky powers. Your to-the-second body clock is so much creepier."

"Pfft." Alex dismissed the comment and shifted up the bed, into kissing distance. "Gimme."
Michael huffed a laugh and pulled Alex the final couple of inches, bringing his mouth right to Michael's so he could give Alex the demanded kiss, lazy and gentle. "It's too early to stay awake."

"Mm, depends why you're awake. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, considering. I wouldn't want to have to move anything heavy, with brain or brawn, but I feel okay. Not as drained as I would have expected," Michael answered thoughtfully.

"You're probably getting a little bit of energy donated by the rest of us. We're definitely still linked up but it's more of a background hum," Alex theorised. "Can you use your telekinesis at all?"

"I think so." Michael concentrated.

"Guerin!" Alex hissed, feeling his boxer-briefs slide down over his ass.

"What? It's a nice, easy target," Michael batted his eyelashes, not bothering to disguise his smirk.

"You calling me easy?" Alex accused with a matching expression.

"No, sir," he hastily retreated, laughter shining in his hazel eyes.

"That's what I thought," Alex grinned, before he caught Michael's lip in his teeth and let go only to press a bruising kiss to his mouth.

Michael sighed, the sound much softer than what Alex was doing. But his physical response was in kind, opening to the pressure of Alex's tongue, meeting him halfway.

Under normal circumstances, Alex would happily have kept kissing Michael, but he didn't really want to get into anything while seven other people could feel it too. He gentled their rhythm and finally withdrew.

"Mm," was all Michael said, eyes closed, lips smiling.

"Put my underwear back, Guerin."

His smile widened and Michael did as requested, sliding the fabric up to Alex's waist. "There."

"Thank you."

Michael met his eyes. "Are you satisfied that I'm alright? Because I am, honest."

"Yeah," Alex agreed, smiling. "You're awesome."

[end chapter forty-eight]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!
And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.
~Tas
"The one down side to blowing up the bunker is that it also took out most of my data mining sources. I still have the financial traces but that's it," Alex sighed, closing the laptop.

"And those haven't budged for a while, you said?" Cam asked from where she lounged on Max's couch.

"Right," Alex confirmed.

"Well that sucks."

"Yep."

"No sign of your brother anywhere?"

"Not that I've found yet. I'll keep digging, but..."

"Yeah."

"Want some coffee? I'm going to make another pot," he offered.

"Coffee would be great, thanks."

Alex got it started and figured he might as well make himself a sandwich. Once he got everything out, he made two, just in case Jenna wanted one. Everyone else had dispersed to their own homes or jobs.

He poured two coffees and added the mugs to the plates sitting overlapped on the small tray, and carried it into the living room.

"Want a hand sitting up?" he held said hand out to Jenna. She grimaced but nodded and grabbed hold, using him as an anchor point to lever herself upright and shift backwards to lean on the pillows.

"Thanks. You feeding me, too?"

Alex chuckled as he took the chair. "Well, it's not like I can't eat both if you aren't hungry. It's ham and cheese. Coffee's black."

"I am good with all of the above."

They consumed the small meal in a comfortable silence. Alex could feel a flicker at the edge of his awareness that felt like Jenna, but he wasn't getting anything beyond a vague sense of her presence. Probably because they were both in a calm state. He knew the permanent link among the three aliens flared when one of them was distressed; it stood to reason any vestigial connection between the humans would behave in a similar fashion.

"So how badly does Evans cope with having people around all the time?"
"It took him a bit of time to adjust, not going to lie," Alex smiled. "But there's a group rule that if he disappears into his bedroom, nobody is to knock on the door unless it's a genuine emergency. It seems to work."

Jenna pursed her lips. "I could see that, yeah. He can get some space and he can trust you guys will come get him if you need to."

"Right."

She nodded, sipping at the coffee, clearly turning everything over in her mind. She'd had a lot of information dumped on her last night. There were bound to be questions.

"How long've you and Guerin been a thing?"

Not a question he'd expected. "A few months."

"Bullshit," her eyebrows shot up. "You don't get 'let me hold you while you relive your abusive childhood' levels of trust from a few months of history. That takes years."

"You sound like Maria, calling me out," Alex huffed a laugh. "We're both right. Guerin and I, we... Let's say, we transitioned into an actual relationship a few months ago. But we originally got involved around the end of high school, so, yeah, ten plus years."

"That's more like it. Were you together between deployments, too?"

"Kind of," Alex hedged, and Jenna groaned.

"Aw, man, you weren't one of those guys, were you? Hi I'm home, let's fuck, see ya next time?"

He made a rueful face. "I'm afraid I was that guy, yeah."

"I did not see that coming. But I guess it's just another sin to lay at your father's feet."

"How so?" Alex enquired, genuinely puzzled.

"Oh, come on. Look at the people who were here last night. Your oldest friend from the first day of school? Two more from elementary school. Almost everyone else was from high school, which was more than ten years ago, as you just pointed out. That is not a chosen family assembled by a guy who can't commit," she asserted.

"Well, yeah, but those are friendships, not romantic relationships. Apples and oranges."

"No, Captain," her headshake was vehement. "That's Red Delicious and Golden Delicious. Two varieties of apples and they both make good pie. Family."

"They're different for me," Alex disagreed.

"Because someone taught you one variety was rotten and you were too young to know it was a lie."

"You sound very sure of that," he was taken aback by how sure.

"Look, you're not the first gay soldier I've seen struggling to get out from underneath the horseshit their daddy piled on. Your father is an extreme case, and it's all extra complicated because of real live aliens and government conspiracies and God knows what else, but the bottom line is the same damn thing. He convinced you your Golden Delicious apples were really oranges and no good for pie. And he was wrong."
"I don't like when people are forced into being something they're not. Or denied being something they are," she shrugged. "I've gotten a lot of shit as a skinny blonde woman with a physical job, first in the military and now in the Sheriff's Department. I'm not fond of being seen as Cop Barbie when I can out-think and out-shoot those assholes."

"Someone actually called you Cop Barbie?"

"Wyatt Long," disgust oozed from her. "I hate that guy. Even more now I know the whole story about the Crashdown shooting."

"Yeah, Wyatt is... Wyatt," Alex sighed. Mention of his name made Alex think, though. "Cam, in the time you've been passing info to my father, has he ever said anything about a woman named Violet?"

"What, you mean Mrs. Manes?"

"Excuse me? What the fuck?"

Jenna's eyes widened. "You didn't know your dad remarried?"

"This is the first I've heard of it. Her name is Violet?" his voice was tight, chest too. His mom had been gone long enough that his dad would have had options of some kind for declaring their marriage null and void. Or maybe they actually got divorced and nobody told Alex.

"Yeah. I haven't met her, to be clear. She's apparently not well, mental health problems, severe enough that she lives in a care home of some kind." She paused, and continued quietly, "I can't believe you didn't know. I mean, I only found out by accident, I don't think the Chief had intended to say anything, but after I'd heard the first bit of the conversation, I guess he thought it would look more suspicious if he didn't explain."

"I'm sorry, I'm just... He married her?" As he started to get past the shock, Alex could see how it would be advantageous to his father. As Violet's husband, he would be in charge of her care, totally legally. If she'd been deemed unfit to make her own decisions about her care, it would naturally fall to her spouse to do so on her behalf.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Fuck. No wonder I couldn't find her. Do you know anything about the care home? A name, location?"

"No, sorry. Listen, are you okay? I didn't mean to drop a bomb on you," she sounded concerned.

"I'm fine. And he would never have told me because Violet was married to Wyatt's father, and she's an alien."

"You're shitting me. There's more of them?"

Alex sighed. "At least one more, yes. She is capable of commandeering someone else's body and funnelling her powers through them, leaving them with no memory of what happened. She used Isobel to murder Rosa Ortecho ten years ago."

"Which would have put her on Project Shepherd's radar, and thus your dad's. How did she orchestrate the accident?"

"She didn't. She murdered the three girls on the ground. Michael and Max got there and thought..."
Isobel had done it while having a bad trip from drugs she'd bought off Rosa, and, they panicked."

"The car was a cover-up. Shit," air whistled through Jenna's teeth in a long exhale.

"Yeah. And from there it all got..."

"Complicated," they said together, and laughed. It always seemed to come back to that word.

"I'm going to get a refill and get back on the computer. Do you want anything else?" Alex asked. His mind had already begun whirring, listing search options, desirable information, and his fingers itched to get in on the action.

"No, thanks. There's still water in the bottle Kyle left after he rebandaged me this morning, and I'm tired again," she sounded annoyed but resigned about it. "I think I'll go back to sleep."

"Keyboard clacking won't bother you?"

Jenna chuckled, "You don't type that hard, Captain."

"All right." Alex offered his hand again so she could lay flat on the couch. He wanted to ask why she seemed to have settled on calling him Captain instead of by his first name, but her eyelids were already closing, fatigue clear on her face.

That question would keep. Right now, Alex had a surprise stepmother to locate.

[end chapter forty-nine]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!

And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
Chapter Notes

On the shorter side but I wanted it on its own. You'll understand why. :+)
~Tas

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

* * * * *

Michael flopped onto the oversized beanbag chair which had been his contribution to Alex's tech headquarters under the cabin. "So did they actually get married? Or was it some paperwork fudging so your dad could maintain control?"

"I don't know, and it really doesn't matter which is true," Alex replied without turning away from his screens. "I'm chasing more critical details."

"Right." Michael didn't buy it, and he didn't bother disguising that fact, even if it did make Alex's shoulders visibly tense up.

"Guerin ---"

"Don't bullshit me, okay? It may not matter to the mission but I know it matters to you," Michael interrupted.

Alex slumped in the chair. There were down sides to working closely alongside someone who knew him well and didn't report to him.

"Come sit with me."

He sighed, spinning to face Michael. "You know I can't get out of that damn thing."

Michael smiled, sensing victory. "I'll get you back on your feet, I promise."

"Fine." Alex gave in less than gracefully, grumpy as he carefully lowered himself onto Michael's lap. He noted the flicker as the screens went dark and frowned.

"Relax, I just turned them off. Your stuff is still running." Michael settled him more comfortably for both of them and wrapped his arms around Alex, pressing a kiss to his temple. Alex felt tense still, stiff, but Michael knew from experience that the body contact would start to make him relax soon enough. It was a little like warming someone up after they'd gotten thoroughly chilled.

Physically, anyway. Any hope of mental relaxation meant getting Alex to talk.

"I get that it makes no practical difference - either way, the Chief is considered the legal guardian or whatever. Power of Attorney dude. But I think you need to know which it is."

"Maybe," Alex admitted. He sighed and tucked his face against the side of Michael's neck, falling silent again, listening to Michael breathe and the quiet thump of his heartbeat. Grateful that Michael simply held him and let him find the words in his own time.
"I've hacked into a lot of heavily encrypted places over the years. I have specifically avoided looking up my mother. I don't doubt I could find her - she's a normal individual, with normal levels of data protection - but, I don't want to," Alex finished in a near whisper. "If she wanted me to know where she was, she would have contacted me herself. She never has."

"And finding out the truth about Violet and your dad means finding out the truth about him and your mom first," Michael spoke softly, understanding the barrier now. Not having had parents felt easier by far than what Alex had grown up with, abandoned by one and abused by the other.

Michael's childhood had sucked, but at least it hadn't been at the hands of actual family.

"If it's regular old hacking, I could do it? Maybe give you an overview, so you don't have to wade through the details?" he offered.

"Mm. If he did fudge the papers, it probably won't be regular old hacking anymore. Whoever did the papers would have needed to cover their tracks and alter my mother's records, too," Alex thought aloud.

"Okay, then if I run into anything I can't get past, that would be an answer in and of itself, right? We could decide then if you need to pursue it further or if we've gleaned enough info elsewhere to leave it be. How does that sound?" Michael wasn't precious about not being on Alex's level with a computer. Or in the same fucking building even.

"That could work, yeah. And it feels like a- an actual solution, not just me ditching. Thank you." He pressed a kiss to Michael's jaw. "Make sure you use ---"

"Use the laptop and keep it away from the network here, yes, sir, of course, sir," Michael cut him off, exasperated. "I do know that."

Alex laughed. "You're an ass."

"I'm not the only ass in the room," he shot back with a smile.

"I know something else, too," Alex told him, smiling when Michael shifted so he could look at Alex, eyebrows raised expectantly. "I love you."

Michael's face underwent a rapid series of complex changes but before Alex could even begin to puzzle them out, Michael was kissing him.

Michael surged forward into Alex's space, redistributing their combined weight so he had full access to Alex's mouth. That beautiful mouth, which had just said the most beautiful thing.

He didn't know how else to express what it meant to him, how to show Alex in no uncertain terms that the words were welcomed and then some.

Alex returned the kisses wholeheartedly, letting Michael move him as he needed to. The emphatic physical reaction reassured him that this was okay, that it was accepted and reciprocated.

Which Alex knew, but there was knowing and there was knowing, and the strength of Michael's response settled him firmly in the latter.

He moved to cradle Michael's face, conveying the same emotion through touch, fingers gentle and reverent on stubbled skin.

The softness in Alex's hands soothed Michael, bringing a corresponding softening to his reaction,
and he slowed the kisses to a light, dry press of lips before he pulled back enough to see and smile at Alex.

"Don’t know what came over me there. It isn't new information. But damn if it didn't pack a punch," he gave a soft, self-deprecating laugh. "Not at all the same as when Isobel says it."

"Well, I should hope it's different from your sister," Alex echoed the laugh.

He shrugged one-shouldered. "I got nothing else to compare it to, so."

Alex hadn't realised that. Objectively, he probably should have, but it had genuinely never occurred to him. "Max?"

Michael chuckled, "You'd think, but he's surprisingly dudebro about some things for a man who cries at the drop of a hat. Indirect declarations only."

"Huh." Alex thought about the people who'd told him they loved him. Liz, Maria, Maria's mom, his own mom when he was little; Michael. For all that it was a short list, it was exponentially longer than Michael's. "Well, you've got me now."

"I do have you now. I'm very pleased about it, too," he grinned.

"So I see." With his focus well and truly disrupted, Alex decided he could put work aside for the night. The search algorithms could run themselves. "I swear you have a spine like a cat, Guerin. I don't understand how you're under me and on top of me. But you need to put me on my feet if I'm going to go upstairs."

As soon as he began to move, Alex realised he should have been more specific, as he was bodily floated free of the beanbag and gently deposited on both feet, the invisible support remaining in place until Alex took a step under his own power. "You are incorrigible."

"Yep," Michael agreed, levering himself out of the beanbag. "Admit it, that's why you love me."

Alex laughed. "It may be a factor."

"Told ya." He dropped a quick kiss on Alex's mouth then wrapped an arm around his waist and steered him towards the ladder, and up.

[end chapter fifty]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!

And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
"What's going on now?"

Alex could appreciate the fatigue in Liz's voice, and sprinkled liberally across the faces in the room. A couple were missing; Isobel and Noah out of town; Maria and Max both at work. Ironic, given they were at Max's, but Kyle had obtained a realtor style key box with a manual combination (unhackable, as Alex had told him - sometimes basic really was better), so all of them could access his place at any time.

Well, Michael always could have come and gone as he pleased, but now, so could the rest of them.

Everyone was tired of feeling hunted. Unfortunately, little of the information he had for the group today would improve that.

Alex took a deep breath and stated, "We found her."

"Violet Long?" Liz gasped, then scrunched her nose. "I mean, Violet Manes?"

It still sounded a million kinds of wrong to Alex's ears, but it was the truth. "Yes. Violet Manes. The marriage is real. Dad didn't need to fudge anything. Apparently Thomas Long initiated divorce proceedings once Violet had been committed the first time, in 2008, and my mom," he took another deep breath, "my mom wasn't a concern because she OD'd before I started high school."

It hurt, so much more than Alex had expected. Michael hadn't had any difficulties discovering her fate. He'd given Alex the bare bones, bullet points version:
- She had gone to live with cousins on the reservation;
- She had fallen into a cycle of drug and alcohol addiction; and
- She had died three years almost to the day after leaving Jesse Manes.

It was all Alex had needed to know to understand. His mother had never returned because his father had destroyed her, too.

And his father must have known of her death but he'd never said word one about it, because holding the hope of his mother's return over Alex's head had been one more way to manipulate his youngest son.

Michael knew full well how difficult this was for Alex, and how predictably stubborn he'd been about being the one to break the news. As far as Michael was concerned, the news was now broken, so he took over the debrief.

"Violet is in a private psychiatric facility on the outskirts of town. She's been there for at least five years, and it looks like that tiny cash trickle from the Pentagon that Alex found a while back is what's paying for her care," he sighed.

"So they shut down Project Shepherd, but someone decided that they should take care of the one alien? How does that make sense?" Kyle exclaimed.
"It's compensation," Alex butted in, shooting a look at Michael when he looked like he might interrupt. "The US government has an illustrious history of paying off non-combatants who are grievously injured by their more clandestine actions."

"I'm confused. Why would they pay off a known alien?" Liz shook her head. "She would have been considered an enemy combatant, surely?"

Michael raised an eyebrow at Alex, who rolled his eyes and shrugged as if to say, go ahead. "We came up with two options. Either Jesse knew the funding was getting cut, and convinced the brass Violet was a mere human casualty so he could go rogue with her, or," he paused, grimacing. "Or he actually fell for her and spun some sob story, with the same end result."

"No official Project anymore, just one captive woman he could bend to his will. The perfect killer," Alex spat. Talking about it was getting him angry all over again and he closed his mouth with a snap, nodding at Michael.

For his part, Michael thought he should be congratulated for being mature enough to not snark at Alex about whether he was allowed to speak.

"Captain's right, there's a tendency to throw money at a problem," Jenna confirmed. "Partly because budgets are so area specific and the funds can't be reallocated to a different area. So if there's a surplus anywhere, it can be stupidly easy to siphon it off to a vague project." She sighed, her tone sharp when she added, "Add in some persistent cultural issues around gender and rank inequalities, and you get brass getting away with fraud while the whistle-blower cools her heels in fucking jail."

"Like Charlie," Liz nodded, giving Jenna's forearm a squeeze.

"Okay, so we know where Violet is. What about Jesse and Flint?" Kyle asked Alex, though he was looking sympathetically at Jenna. Alex made a mental note to ask him privately later if Kyle wanted reciprocal wingman services.

The idea cheered him up a little and Alex summoned a smile. "Well, Flint has been disciplined, and is under threat of demotion if he fucks up again. He's also been shipped out overseas, back into the loving bosom of the Army, no doubt to remove him from the corrupting influence of us flyboys." The smile grew into a grin at Jenna's snort of laughter. "Something you want to say, soldier?"

"Nope. Captain Flyboy." She had an unexpectedly girly giggle.

Alex raised his eyebrows. "And when's the last time you got chucked out of an aircraft?"

"Never," she admitted, "but I'm game to try it, if there's anywhere around here to go."

"Yeah?" he hadn't expected that but it was welcome. "I don't know if there are any commercial operators but I'm sure I can, uh, pull some strings and get someone to take us up."

"Oh, Alex," Liz groaned, "that was a truly terrible pun."

"What happens if your leg doesn't hold up on the landing?" Kyle enquired, beating Michael to what Michael considered the pertinent question.

He shrugged. "Then I land on my ass. Wouldn't be the first time, even when I had two good legs."

"Maybe I'm crazy," Liz interjected, "but it actually sounds like fun."

Alex smiled at her, "I could probably wrangle a group outing."
"Not me, man," Kyle declined. "I'll stay on the ground and patch up any scrapes you guys get."

Michael sighed when Alex looked at him. "Count me in. Someone has to watch your dumb ass. And pick you up off it."

"Ha ha," Alex rolled his eyes. "Well, I guess I'll check with the others, see if they're interested, and then I'll see what I can arrange."

"Oh, Maria will want to go, hands down," Liz assured him. She made a rueful face. "Max... will probably stay with Kyle."

Michael couldn't help the laugh. "I gotta agree on Max. Can't say either way for Iz or Noah, though, you'll have to ask."

"I will." Alex hadn't meant to stray so far off topic but it had lightened the mood. He sobered as he continued, "Flint has effectively been taken out of the game. The real worry is my father."

"When isn't it?" Michael groused, subsiding at Alex's pointed look.

"Why, what's he up to now?" Kyle jumped in.

"That's the problem: nobody knows. He's AWOL."

"What, like, actually AWOL? He's gone totally off grid?" Jenna sounded as shocked as Alex had been.

"Yes. He hasn’t been seen since that night, with the SMAW, and he hasn't contacted his CO. That makes him very, very dangerous, because it suggests he has hit the point of having nothing left to lose."

"So he could go for a murder-suicide setup if he believes it's the only way to win. And by win, I mean kill all of us," Kyle sounded resigned.

"Possible to likely," Alex agreed.

Liz threw up her hands. "There has to be something we can do."

"There is," Michael spoke as he pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and passed it to Kyle. "That's a list of the medications they have Violet on."

"We need to know what those drugs are intended to do, any known interactions, the works," Alex explained. "Ultimately, we need to figure out if Violet is genuinely mentally incapacitated, or if the drugs are making her that way."

"Just because it's in her medical records doesn't mean she's actually taking them, we need to remember that, too," Jenna asserted.

"She's definitely on something. Whatever it is, it's muting her powers, because if her telekinesis were functional, she'd have used it to break out of there years ago," Michael clarified.

"I don't know if that's going to be due to meds, though, Michael," Kyle disagreed, looking at the paper. "At a quick glance, these are mostly anti-psychotic drugs, and they take weeks to get fully out of the body. There's no way something like that could be a power suppressant, not if it gets unblocked and reblocked on the regular."

"Right, it would have to be a physical suppressant of some kind. Like an actual restraint, as opposed
to a chemical restraint," Liz nodded.

Michael spread his hands and shrugged when everyone looked at him. Perks of being the only alien in the room. "I have no idea, man. We've never come across anything that functions as a suppressant."

"Okay, well, I'll go over all this in detail," Kyle rattled the paper, "but that will only educate us as to her mental state, not her powers. You'll have to look elsewhere for that."

"What do you want to do once you know that much?" Liz queried.

Alex glanced at Michael, who didn't meet his eyes. He'd already made it clear he didn't like the plan but he'd go along with it. Alex let his gaze roam the rest of them. "Violet's records state she is allowed visits from family members only. Of which I am one."

"Wait, you want to go meet the crazy alien? What the hell, Alex?" Kyle burst out.

"Yeah, I don't know if that's such a good idea," Liz agreed, somewhat apologetically.

"How would you defend against getting possessed or whatever? If it turned out she wasn't currently blocked?" Jenna asked, going straight to the practicalities, which Alex appreciated.

"Well, Guerin and I have been experimenting some with the glass fragment, and it stretches a fair bit, definitely over a greater distance than there is between the front and back of the facility, going by the blueprints," he explained. "If I go in connected to at least two others, I think that will provide adequate protection."

"Just the glass? Not by handprint?" Liz wanted to know.

"Too risky," Alex shook his head. "I can't chance the physical evidence."

"Plus, for all we know, Violet has some way of sniffing out the presence of a handprint," Michael added. "It's a less subtle connection."

"If she's only allowed family, you'll be the only one who can enter her room," Kyle spoke thoughtfully. "But there's nothing stopping a couple of people from hanging out in the waiting room slash lobby."

"The handprint connection is stronger, too, isn't it? So if you're keeping it to the glass level, maybe a couple more people can wait in the car," Jenna suggested. "The more people in a connection, the stronger it is, as I understand it. You'd have extra backup available too if things go tits up."

"That might actually work better," Alex considered the idea. "Especially because the aliens could be in the car then. I'd prefer to keep them out of the building."

Michael rolled his eyes, sighing. "You're going to make me sit in the car with Max. I hate you already."

Everyone laughed, and Liz teased, "Yeah, it'll be a picnic for him, too."

"So adjusting for the carful of bitchy aliens," Alex grinned at Michael's indelicate snort. "I'd like Kyle and Cam with me inside. Kyle, you'll know if there's anything off medically about the place, and Cam, I'm trusting you to watch my six and defend if necessary."

"You got it," Jenna confirmed instantly.
"Count me in, since it doesn't involve skydiving," Kyle chuckled.

"Alex, do you want to tell Max yourself or is it okay if I fill him in? I'll see him before you do, and, he might take some convincing to agree to not being in the waiting room. I think I'll have better luck than you would," Liz gave him a half smile.

"Yeah, I agree. If you're up for that then yes, please, let Max know what's going on, and have him make sure his schedule is up to date so I can plan."

She nodded, "Will do. Thanks."

Michael stated, "And I'll catch up Noah and Isobel when they get back."

"Good," Alex smiled at him. "I'll work out some stuff to say, kind of a dress rehearsal, and we'll do it soon, when everyone is available."

"All righty then!" Kyle clapped his hands. "Strategy session's over. Who wants ice cream?"

"What is with you and ice cream, Valenti?" Jenna scoffed.

"I'm a simple man, with simple pleasures," his lofty tone dissolved at Liz's snicker. "Hey, no commentary from the high school girlfriend peanut gallery. It's your fault, anyway: I spent so much time in the Crashdown waiting for you that I probably ate my weight in ice cream on a weekly basis."

"Unless you were stealing fries," Liz countered.

"Well, they go together," Alex declared, laughing when the room erupted in booring. "It's a good combination, honest."

"And this is the man we entrust with our lives, ladies and gentlemen," Kyle shook his head sorrowfully.

"Just get the bowls, Kyle," Liz instructed. "I'll get the scoop."

[end chapter fifty-one]

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on Tumblr if you'd like; same username. My ask box is open!

And yes, same Tasyfa as in the OG Roswell fandom once upon a time.

~Tas
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