**W(h)ere we belong**

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**Character:** Jensen Ackles, Jared Padalecki, Misha Collins, Christian Kane, Chad Michael Murray, Tom Welling, Genevieve Cortese, Jim Beaver, Padalecki Family, Sandra McCoy, Danneel Harris, Milo Ventimiglia, Sophia Bush, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Sebastian Roché, Mark Pellegrino, Jake Abel, Aldis Hodge, Matt Bomer, Conner Paolo, Tyler Hoechlin
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### Summary

His whole life, Jensen has never really fit anywhere. Moving to a new school and trying to hide old demons is hard enough, before adding a guy to the mix. A really hot, really notorious guy. One who is, for some reason, intent on Jensen.

Jared has been waiting his whole life to meet someone like the green-eyed boy; now that he has him, he doesn't plan on letting go. But how to get the beautiful boy with the pain-filled eyes to trust him? To see all that he feels for him?

And what happens when the biggest problem becomes a whole lot bigger than insecurities and crazy exes?

What happens when the grand prize is the life of the guy he loves?

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### Notes

I have no claim to anyone or anything. Were-creatures aren't real. Unfortunately.
New Friends

Prologue

A sharp crack resounded through the air. Pain, white hot and instant, lanced through his chest. He barely had time to cry out in surprise or pain or fear before his knees gave out, thudding against the unforgiving ground, too weak now, to hold up his body.

He was only vaguely aware of the warm gushing that bloomed red across his naked chest, mind consumed instead by the fervent prayer that it was all over now. That his sacrifice hadn’t been in vain. That the pain-filled road that brought him here, took him and only him to the murky underwaters of Death.

“Nooo!!!!!”

The scream, although saturated with anguish and terror, was exactly the thing that made this whole endeavor worth it. He felt himself being lifted and the comforting feel of strong arms encircling him made even the pain dull slightly. All at once, he was faced with the reminder of why he had done what he had done. And he could never regret it.

His body was shaking badly, his own shudders of shock mixing with the violent tremors of the man holding him. He wanted so badly to reach out, brush away the cascade of tears, tell the man that he was going to be okay, that everything would be okay with time.

“Don’t you do this to me,” the man begged roughly, bringing his face close to press their foreheads together. “Don’t you do this, don’t you leave me.”

I’d never leave you, he wants to tell the man. Not really. I love you.

As though the man can hear his thoughts, which sometimes seems likely, he screams for help before leaning down again to pepper his face with kisses. “I love you, God I love you so fucking much. Please don’t this to me, I’m begging you, please, please, please…”

“Love…too..” is all he manages to choke out before he has to succumb to the looming darkness. The last thing he hears is an anguished cry permeating the air.

And then, it is dark.

###

Chapter one: New Friends

Pain was a mistress Jensen was intimately familiar with.

Maybe it sounds morbid, and to an extent, it really is, but the fact of the matter remains, that Jensen had been through far too much pain in the seventeen years he’d been alive.

After losing both his parents in a car crash when he was no more than 2 years old, Jensen was palmed off to the system when his aunt and uncle thought themselves “too busy to entertain and raise a baby”. He was one of the fortunate ones, finding himself with a couple that loved him and treated them like their own. Quite honestly, though, it would soon come to pass that Jensen’s luck, ended there.
Jensen would argue that Lady Luck gave him one more good thing, just to spice up her never-ending quest for his torture and subsequent demise.

Of course, with the luck he had, it was quite a story to get his karmic payback.

~* Jensen *~

“Class, meet our new student, Jensen Ackles.”

Jensen fought the urge to groan as Mrs. Cohen, his new form room teacher, felt the need to announce his presence. This, as far as he was concerned, was the worst part of coming to a new school. Everyone feeling the overwhelming need to announce your arrival, like the entire student body hadn’t already weeded him out as the new kid.

Jensen offered his teacher a half-hearted smile at her efforts, that came out as more of a grimace. She nodded at him to take a place and, noting that the only empty seat was near the back, he figured that once, maybe luck was on his side for a little while. He nodded once to the dark-haired boy sitting next to him before slinking down in his seat in a vain attempt to lose the attention so kindly prompted by his well-meaning teacher.

Fighting against the urge to roll his eyes, he managed to stop himself from reacting when he noticed the boy next to him staring at him in his peripheral vision, obviously trying to be stealthy about it.

“Don’t strain yourself trying to be discreet,” Jensen commented dryly.

“You’d rather I stare directly at you?” his rough voice sounded slightly surprised, and definitely amused, and Jensen huffed out a small breath, lifting his head to meet piercing blue eyes. Jensen was never usually this direct, but last night had been a rough one, and combine that with the constant gazes attributed to his peers’ amazement at a new and fresh face? It was understandable that he wasn’t really in the mood to be affable.

“It beats acting like everyone else here with SNTS,” he snorted.

“SNTS?” the boy asked curiously.

“Shiny New Toy Syndrome,” Jensen explained. “You know, like when a kid gets some new toy for Christmas and he can’t help staring at it because it’s new?”

“You, being the new toy in this analogy?” he clarified, sending a grin Jensen’s way. Realizing that he was attracting attention now, which was his last intention, he returned to his original position and fixed his eyes on his table.

“Obviously.”

The bell for first period rang shrilly, saving Jensen from any more of a discussion, and with a small nod, he kept his head down and wove his way through the mill of students and out the door.

Stopping briefly at his locker to grab his Chemistry books, he groaned when he realized the door was jammed. Of course it would be. As he wrestled with the handle, cursing low under his breath, a hand suddenly shot out, slamming hard against the locker and making Jensen cringe at the sound that he normally associated with pain. He recovered quickly, however, when the door swung easily open, and as he turned to thank whichever Locker Whisperer had helped him, he was met once more by startling cerulean eyes. The boy grinned at him again, and Jensen wondered why he was being so friendly.
“Seems like we’re locker mates too,” he grinned, opening his own locker next to Jensen’s in the same way.

“Seems like,” Jensen mumbled, quickly grabbing his books and trying not to meet the boy’s eyes. It wasn’t out of disrespect, no; Jensen just didn’t trust anyone. Period. Generally, for that very reason, it was easier to just shut people out. For some reason, though, Jensen didn’t really want to shut him out. He seemed like a cool guy, and it wasn’t like he had a load of friends or even friendly faces at the moment.

“You should be more excited,” the boy smirked. “You get to see this gorgeous face every morning and have a good excuse for it.”

“Sure,” Jensen deadpanned before he could stop and think about his words. “At least you can fix my locker when I need to.”

The boy barked out a laugh and Jensen blushed a little as he realized what he’d allowed himself to say.

“I like you,” the guy grinned, nodding at him in approval. A glint of happiness sparked inside Jensen as he allowed himself a smile, forcing himself not to hide for once.

“I can hardly contain my excitement,” he rolled his eyes, grinning finally, as the boy let out another loud laugh.

“I’m Christian Kane,” he offered, holding out his hand. “Call me Chris.”

“Jensen Ackles,” he gripped the proffered hand, throwing caution to the wind. “Don’t you dare call me Jenny.”

“Noted,” Chris laughed, slamming his locker shut. “Now, Jensen, tell me; how good are your wingman skills?”

###

Chris was definitely a little more talkative than Jensen first thought, filling the time to walk to their chemistry class with mindless chatter, mostly about Sophia Bush, the head cheerleader Jensen guessed his new friend was obsessed with. He didn’t mind it; in fact, Jensen would go so far as to say he really enjoyed having something to fill in the mind-numbing silence he’d been stuck with since he left home and his best friend, Cas, in favor of coming here. Of course, with the way his foster father was allowing things to escalate, Jensen wasn’t holding his breath about this place either.

“…definitely want to bang that,” Chris finished, bringing Jensen back from his thoughts. He smiled at the wolfish grin his friend was sporting, and flicked his chin subtly in the direction of the cheerleaders with their backs facing him. Judging from the love-struck expression that suddenly found its way to Chris’s face, one of them was Sophia, and Chris definitely wanted more than to just “bang that”. He chuckled, for the first time in a while, nudging Chris lightly in the side.

“Lose the puppy-love look, Romeo,” he sniggered, and without missing a beat, Chris flipped him off, only serving to make him laugh again. Chris shoved him lightly to the side, and Jensen felt himself connect with something warm and solid.

“Sorry…” he started to say, before looking up in the hazel eyes of what he was sure was the most gorgeous guy on the face of the earth. His heart felt like it had stopped beating in his chest and the world around him seemed to come to a complete stand-still. All that mattered were the chocolate brown eyes looking down at him and the strong arms encasing him. He felt almost dizzy with the
crazed impulse to bury himself in this handsome stranger and the worst part was, he knew he’d happily do so and stay in his embrace permanently, if the idea wasn’t already bucket-loads of crazy.

What the hell was going on with him?
Thanks so much for the response, guys! It's been really heartening :) Hope you enjoy!

~* Jared *~

The smell was downright intoxicating.

He had caught the faintest whiff of it coming into school, and the sweet smell had triggered every Alpha response in his body; he had even missed homeroom in favor of making sure that he hadn’t inadvertently allowed his eyes to shift to its stunning amber, or allowed his canines to distend. Whatever the smell was, it was amazing, and Jared just wanted to wrap himself in it forever.

Which is why he couldn’t possibly understand why the rest of them couldn’t smell it.

“You’re imagining things, Jay-Man,” Chad clapped his back with a shit-eating grin. The blond set his books on the counter of the Chemistry lab and turned to face Jared. “There is no new smell.”

“You know I hate to agree with Chad- and I really hate to agree with him- but I don’t smell anything different either,” Genevieve piped up. The petite brunette shrugged her delicate shoulders. “We could ask Sandy though, and Danni and Chris and Misha and Tommy if they’ve smelt this amazing new scent of yours.”

Jared grimaced at the mention of Sandy; his ex-girlfriend had been not-so-subtly hinting at wanting to get back together, and as much as Sandy and him were friends since they were pups, the Beta had a special knack for getting under his skin. More than anything, Jared hated how she felt like she was better than their friends, even though she held the same power as most of them; they were all Betas, with the exception of Chad, Chris and Jared, who were Alphas. Jared was his father’s heir, and once they’d gotten together, Sandy had turned even haughtier, and once she’d proclaimed herself as Jared’s Beta, he knew they had to break up. For more obvious reasons, other than the fact that he was leaning more towards gay than bi these days.

She wasn’t his mate. Maybe Jared was being old-fashioned, but he was going to hold out until he found his mate, not force a mating for the sake of having someone. He’d heard stories about finding your mate; about how your world suddenly revolves around them instead of the sun. About the overwhelming feelings of love and lust and protectiveness, so primal and raw that you can almost feel it burning through the blood in your veins. Everything in the world ceases to matter with the exception of your mate and their happiness; it was literally like finding the other half of your soul, and people who have mated, often told him that it was similar to waking up from a dream. This life that they live before their mate suddenly seems like they’ve been going through life only semi-conscious, and now, they see everything with awakened eyes.

Who wouldn’t want to wait for that?

Sandy, for one. Jared knew that other members of the pack felt similarly to her, but a fair amount still believed in mating, and Jared was one of them. He knew it would be worth it, and he was willing to wait, however long it might take.
“Chris made a new friend in homeroom,” Misha informed them as he sat down, bringing Jared away from his fantastical thoughts.


“I saw him too,” Danni contributed as she walked in, her bag still on her shoulder. “They’re on their way here.”

Jared was curious, to say the least. Chris had been his friend since as far back as he could remember, and even so, they weren’t all too close. For as long as he’d known him, Jared hadn’t known Chris to make a friend, preferring their pack, or sometimes even isolating himself a little. Whoever the alpha had befriended must have been something special. For a moment, Jared entertained the thought that it was a girl- could his friend have found his mate?- but quickly dismissed the thought when Danni spoke again.

“He was pretty hot too,” she divulged. “Like, smokin’. He’s in our homeroom.”

Jared was eager to see who had managed to so easily slip through Chris’s walls and strike up a friendship against every possible odd. Besides, there was rarely any newcomers to their little town and for someone to come in their senior year? Must have been some circumstance.

Whatever thought he’d had, though, was obliterated when that sweet smell wafted over his senses again. His inner wolf roared in recognition and he fought the urge to shift, to hunt down the smell until he could find it and never ever let it go.

“It’s back,” he said in a low voice, frustrated beyond belief at the restrictions of being in his human form. “Tell me you guys can smell it!”

If he was hoping for any sort of agreement, he was sorely mistaken. He growled low in his throat as the scent became stronger and stronger…

…bringing it through the door…

…In the form of the most beautiful boy Jared ever had the pleasure of seeing.

His heart stopped beating, and the chatter around him muted to favor the rich, silken chuckle escaping from the boy’s plush, sinful lips. The alpha in him growled, roaring possessively when Chris touched him, something inside him chanting thunderously mine, mine, mine. Another laugh escaped the boy and it made Jared’s toes curl in pleasure; he wanted that sound to become a permanent fixture in his life.

Chris shoved the boy and Jared barely contained the protective snarl that was threatening to rip through him. He was brought to a crushing halt when the boy stumbled and with lightning quick reflexes, he bracketed his arms to brace the stunning boy against his chest.

“Sorry…” a warm voice as smooth as honey left the boy’s mouth as he turned his face up to look at Jared. Time halted, and all that mattered was that he keep the boy in his arms. He drank in the strong, square cut of his jaw and the light dusting of freckles that Jared wanted to trace with his tongue; he wondered idly where else on this boy’s body the adorable flecks were. Long lashes a shade lighter than his dirty blond hair framed mesmerizing, break-taking green eyes that, once they met his, made everything in Jared’s world make sense suddenly. The boy was saying something, but all Jared could focus on was the entirely too kissable lips that were just a breath away from his own, and still too far away for Jared’s liking.
"Um…can I…?" The boy gestured helplessly to where Jared’s arms were still wrapped around him. Like snapping out of a trance, the world came back into focus, sounds filtering through and the stunned gazes of his pack members drilling a hole in him.

"Right, um…sorry…" he apologized sheepishly, offering the boy a small smile as he let go. It took every bit of restraint he had, since he was already fighting against the compulsion to allow his wolf to claim the boy as his own. "I’m Jared," he introduced himself, for the first time in his life feeling shyness creep up on him.

"Jared," he returned, offering a hand. Jared had the strangest impulse to drag the offered hand to his mouth and press butterfly kisses over each knuckle in turn. Thankfully, he could still control his wolf most of the time, so the alpha had to settle for a handshake. Like an electric shock, the touch of the boy send sparks blazing over every inch of his body, and they both let go at the sheer force of it.

"Nice to meet you." Jared was pleased to note that he was getting his vocabulary back in slow stints.

"Likewise," the boy- Jensen- smiled, almost shyly before returning to Chris’s side. Jared let the question fall into his eyes as he stared at his longtime friend, and couldn’t hold back the sigh of relief as Chris shook his head minutely; no, there was no attraction to the boy, he had not claimed him. Chris was straighter than an arrow, but it never hurt to be sure. Although Jared was fairly certain that, even if the other Alpha had staked a claim, he would have had no qualms challenging him over it; and he would have won.

Whoa, wait; why was the thought of anyone else having him so unbearable? A growl was bubbling in his chest at the mere thought of anyone touching the green-eyed boy.

"Holy shit, Jay-Man," Genevieve’s whispered exhalation caught his attention and he turned to face his pack members.

"What?" he asked, trying valiantly to ignore the fragrant smell that called to every cell in his body.

"Buddy," Chad, for once, looked serious, and somewhat troubled. “I think you just found your mate.”

~*Jensen*~

Running a hand roughly though his hair, Jensen avoided eye contact with Chris until they were both seated at the lab counter furthest from that Jared guy. He sighed gustily; he had no time for a silly crush and really, why would someone like that look twice at someone like him?

“What just happened?” Chris asked suspiciously, flopping down next to him.

“Damn if I know,” Jensen answered, trying to control the shakiness in his voice. What was it about that guy? “He helped steady me and introduced himself, that’s it.”

“Didn’t seem like that was it,” Chris narrowed his eyes at his new friend. Jensen stuck out his chin in defiance, meeting the suspicious look head-on.

“Well, unless you saw something I didn’t, never mind the fact that I was there, that was it, Chris,” he insisted.

“Then why’s he looking at you?” Chris asked with a grin. Jensen fought hard not to turn around to see if he was right; he was not a pre-pubescent girl with her first crush, thank you very much!
Suddenly, the mystery guy’s impressive physique came to mind and Jensen’s mouth dried. Everything took on a different meaning and he groaned at the implications. “The guy is built like a freaking linebacker, Chris.” He worried his lip between his teeth. “I think I can safely say that I will be stuffed in a locker or hanging from a basketball hoop by the end of the day.”

Chris snorted. “Jared’s not like that,” he assured Jensen, who breathed a small sigh of relief, even if he didn’t quite believe the boy. “He actually is our linebacker, but he’s not a bully. Pretty popular, and can be downright scary if you mess with him, but he never reacts without provocation.”

“You know him?” Jensen asked, trying to sound casual.

“This town?” Chris scoffed lightly. “Everyone knows everyone.”

“Fair enough.” Jensen got the impression that his friend was relying on half-truths, but for the time being, he was willing to let it slide. God knew he was familiar with the need to use them. “Let’s just hope I haven’t caught his attention.”

“I think you have, just not in the way you think,” he smirked. “I know that boy, and staring the way he has been? Not his usual M.O. Usually, he’s the one being stared at.”

“I can believe that,” Jensen mumbled, earning a laugh from the blue-eyed boy. “But in any event, I’m just going to stay out of his way. The last thing I need is to deal with a pissed off Hulk-man who wants my ass on a pike.”

“I don’t think that’s where he wants your ass, Freckles,” Chris waggled his eyebrows and Jensen scowled at the nickname and his friend’s implication.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“But that’s just such a fun place to be.”

Jensen glared at Chris as their teacher swept in through the doors, saving his scathing comment for another time. Chris just laughed; the ass hat.

“Alright people,” the teacher, a middle-aged man with a surly expression and a receding hairline crossed his arms and glared at the class. “I’ve just been made aware that there’s a new student in our class?”

“Yeah, Mr. B,” Chris nodded towards Jensen when he made no move to own up. Jensen picked up his head and after shooting Chris a glare, met the eyes of the man in front.

“Jensen Ackles, Sir,” he said, by way of introduction, face flaming with embarrassment. The man smiled slightly, losing some of the original frostiness in his expression.

“Welcome to Chemistry, Boy,” he inclined his head in a brief nod and Jensen offered him a relieved grin when he made no move to further publicize his existence. “Alright, we need to pick partners for the semester. I am going to approach people and they will pick a name out of the baseball cap. That will be your partner for the semester, non-negotiable.”

When the teacher- Mr. Beaver, Chris whispered to him- stopped in front of him, Jensen offered another tentative smile and picked a slip of paper. “Padalecki, J,” he read out, stumbling slightly over the surname. “What is he, Polish?” he blurted before he could stop himself.

“I get that a lot,” a deep, and painfully familiar voice cut through the chuckles of the class, and if Jensen was chagrined before, he was downright mortified now. Jared.
“Pick a bench, boys,” Mr. Beaver chuckled, moving on to Chris.

“Bush, S.,” Chris read out. Jensen shot his friend a quick grin as he picked up his backpack; something told him this was going to be an interesting semester in the Chemistry class.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered an apology immediately as Jared drew closer. “My foot had a catastrophic first meeting with my mouth.”

Jared laughed indulgently, and the sound went straight to Jensen’s insides, basking in the sound. “That’s okay,” he assured him, hazel eyes warm enough to convince Jensen that he might not be a bully after all. “You made Mr. B smile on the first day of school, within the first 5 minutes of the lesson. You deserve a medal or something.”

Jensen smiled, averting his eyes. Honestly, he was kind of painfully shy. Somehow, he had hit it off with Chris, which was a rare event in itself. He didn’t see himself being able to make an impression twice in a day, especially on someone who was a walking sex God by himself.

“How do you like the town so far?” Jared asked, breaking into Jensen’s thoughts.

“It’s okay,” Jensen shrugged, still not meeting his eyes, and cursing the flush that was slowly creeping up his face. “Haven’t had too much time to check it out properly as yet.”

“You should,” Jared encouraged. “I’ve got football after school tomorrow, but if you’re not busy, maybe I could show you around after?”

Jensen blushed further, even as he tried to figure out what Jared’s motive behind his friendliness could be. “That’s okay,” he declined shyly. “You seem like a nice guy, but that doesn’t mean you have to feel sorry for me, rack up good-guy points a la all-inclusive tour guide.”

“I’m not feeling sorry for you,” Jared interjected, confused.

“Good,” Jensen interrupted, before he could carry on. “Now, what do you know about Chemistry? I’m decent at it, at best.”

“I suck at it,” Jared declared sunnily, thankfully letting go of their previous topic. “The only Chemistry I’m familiar with, is the one between people.” He winked at Jensen, who promptly turned away again, blushing fiercely and try with dogged determination to ignore the fluttering in his stomach.

Yeah. It was really going to be an interesting semester in the Chemistry class.

~*Jared*~

“I can’t believe I said that,” Jared moaned into his folded arms, where he had burrowed his face in. They had just finished football practice, and he was waiting in the locker room until his friends were ready to leave.

“Neither can I, man, that’s gotta be the oldest line in the history of pick-ups,” Tom Wellings, another pack member chuckled as he slammed his locker door shut. “You find your mate, the guy you’ve been waiting your whole life for, and you use a pick-up line that stopped working about 3 decades ago,” he scoffed with a mocking grin. Without moving his head from its hiding place, Jared flipped his friend the bird.

“Jay-Man,” Chad’s voice broke through Tom’s roars of laughter. “Are you sure this is a good idea? Lusting after a human without the intention of lovin’ and leavin’ em?”
Jared picked up his head now, to glare at his friend, daring him to go on.

“I’m just saying,” Chad held up his hands defensively, “that sure, the guy’s easy on the eyes, but are you sure about trying to court him, or whatever it is you’re planning to do? Human mates haven’t existed in decades for a reason dude.”

“I’m sure,” Jared stated coldly. “What, do you just expect me to ignore my mate? I don’t even think that’s remotely possible.”

“I’m not saying ignore either,” he shrugged, and made the mistake of being callous. “I’m just saying that maybe you just need to bang him and get him out of your system. Don’t make the mistake of tying yourself to him, he might be more trouble than he’s worth.”

In a second, Jared had Chad slammed against the row of lockers, pinning him there with a muscled arm that didn’t do justice to the power coursing through him. A warning growl reverberated in his chest and red danced along the edge of his vision.

“He is my mate,” Jared hissed dangerously. “Best friend or not, don’t you ever speak about him like that again, are we understood?”

“Yes, Alpha,” Chad nodded, letting his head fall submissively in remorse. Fighting past the anger burning hot in his veins, Jared let go of his friend and took a deep breath. He never threw his power around, and the pack knew that, so Chad was appropriately chagrined.

“Chad does have an inkling of a point though, Jay-Man,” Tom commented. “Don’t bite my head off,” he warned when Jared turned his attention and his growls to his other friend, “all I’m saying is that if you’re going to court a human, then before you mate with him, he has to know the truth.”

Jared calmed when he realized that Tom wasn’t about to speak against his intention to win Jensen over. “I know,” he nodded, running a hand through his hair and returning to his place on the bench. “I know,” he repeated. “But how do I have that conversation? How do you tell a human that you’ve met and spoken to for the better part of an hour, that you’re in love with him, and oh, yeah, that you’re a werewolf, but not just any werewolf, no, the Alpha destined to lead a pack, of which he already knows quite a few members? Not something you blurt out over coffee.”

“Good point,” Tommy conceded, “but you need to find a way, Jay-Man. Especially if you intend on mating with him. You gotta think things through here.”

“I don’t wanna think things through,” Jared pouted, his voice taking on a petulant tone.

“Where was this Jared when I wanted to crash the prom last year and pelt the seniors with stink bombs?” Chad asked incredulously, nudging him with his leg.

“He was side-tracked by the Jared gathering enough bail money for a worst-case scenario,” Jared answered dryly, rolling his eyes with a grin, showing Chad he was forgiven for his little tirade.

Chad pursed his lips in thought before nodding in agreement. “That’s fair.”

“Still gotta tell the guy, Jay-Man,” Tommy steered the topic back and slammed his locker door shut. “Have you asked him out yet?”

“Yeah,” Jared muttered, his face coloring. “He politely declined.”

“Oh, man!” Chad whooped a laugh. “Mr. Desirable gets shot down by the mystery new boy!”
“Shut up, Chad,” he griped, slapping his friend across the back of his head. “I’m gonna win him over,” he declared, a predatory grin lighting his face up. “I just gotta step up my game.”

It was time to bring in the heat.
Quick warning: There is child abuse and violence featured in this chapter. Not too graphic, but present nonetheless. If that might make you squirm, I would suggest skipping the flashback! On that note, the italics indicate a memory flashback Jensen has, and normal print takes place in the present. Thanks once again for the most amazing feedback!

~*Jensen*~

Jensen felt, certifiably, like Death warmed over. He lay on his bed in a fetal position, trying to breathe through the searing pain, air coming out in sharp, short pants. Tears burned the back of his eyes and he swore inwardly as he tried to hold back a sob. You’d think after 10 years, he’d be immune to this. He’d stop being emotionally destroyed by it...

“Shit,” Jensen mumbled to himself as he turned the corner to get to their new house. The sight of the car in the driveway had his heart beating double-time and his palms growing sweaty; he was late.

He let himself in the house, hands shaking like a crack addict, praying to a God he no longer even believed in that his foster dad was passed out or asleep or, miracle of miracles, sober.

Of course, there was a reason Jensen no longer believed in a God.

He was scarcely through the archway leading into the living room before his face had a brutal reacquainting with a rough, calloused fist. The closed handed blow blasted across his face, and would leave a nicely colored bruise on his cheekbone by morning, but that was the least of his worries.

Caught off-guard, Jensen staggered under the sheer force of the blow. He was bulking up slightly now, so he didn’t fall as easily as he used to, but that only meant that Eric, foster father of the year (not), would try harder to send him sprawling. A well-placed kick to Jensen’s calf did the trick, and the man proceeded to rain blows on him. Curled up in a ball on the floor, trying to minimize himself as a target, Jensen only caught half of the words spewing from Eric’s mouth; a cacophony of insults and accusations that Jensen had heard longer than he cared to remember.

When he had refused to make a sound, refused to cry out, to beg for him to stop, Eric seemed to lose interest. Spitting one last scathing remark at Jensen, he had left, fumbling drunkenly through the hallway and up to his bedroom. Jensen stayed huddled on the floor for a moment, fighting past the blinding pain and the hurt that never seemed to go away. He couldn’t tune out Eric’s accusations any more than he could tune out the sound of rain during a thunderstorm.

“It’s your fault she’s dead, you ungrateful son of a bitch!”

Jensen flinched as the words rang with clear clarity in his mind; if not for the loud puttering upstairs, Jensen would have thought Eric was right the next to him, for all the lucidity with which the words resonated in his mind. He let out an involuntary whimper when he unfurled his body from its defensive slump. He ached everywhere, the coppery tang of blood assaulting his nose as he
struggled into a sitting position. Trying to be clinical, he analyzed his quickly bruising body; his back and torso screamed with pain, and on account of all the boots he’d taken to that area, he was sure he had a few bruised ribs, maybe one or two cracked ones. His upper body was already starting to bruise blue and he was sure his legs were following suit, even covered as they were by his jeans. His lip had split from the blow and his cheek was still smarting, so he could count on there being a fantastic little reminder of his first day at his new school.

All in all? He’d had worse. And how messed up was that?

Gathering every last reserve of strength, he forced himself to his feet, gasping at the pain that scattered white bursts of light across his vision. Clutching his ribs, which were screaming in deafening protests to his movement, he made steady progression to the bathroom opposite his bedroom.

He needed a shower.

Standing under the spray and turning the water as blistering as he could stand, did little to help with his pain. If anything, the extra pressure and the scalding water over tender skin made the pain increase slightly, but it was worth it for the muscles in his back uncoiling for the first time that day. He scrubbed at himself almost mechanically, hissing when the contact intensified the pain in his midsection ten-fold.

Yeah, he definitely had a cracked rib or two.

After struggling into a loose sweatpants and Cas’s old and very baggy sweatshirt that he’d never bothered to return, he’d settled in a fetal position on his bed. It was then, and only then, that he allowed the tears that had been building up, to spill over. Even as he cursed himself for doing so, Jensen knew that it would never stop hurting. It would never stop hurting, because he could remember a time when he had called Eric “Dad”. He could remember a time when Eric had told the world with a proud smile, that Jensen was his son, and had threatened bodily harm to anyone who dared to say otherwise. Jensen knew he was adopted, had known since he was 6 and could comprehend what that meant, but for two wonderful years, he’d been told every day that it meant nothing to his parents. He’d been reassured, patiently and lovingly, and even as a child, he’d known that they had meant every word of it.

And then, the accident happened.

Jensen was 8 at the time, and suddenly, he was 8 going on 45, for all the things he had to deal with. For a month, he’d kept them afloat, using all the emergency cash he could find and the money he’d gotten for his birthday, while Eric found a comfortable little nesting place at the bottom of a whiskey bottle. Jensen didn’t even have time to grieve before he was thrown head-first into running a household, the fear of losing Eric spurring him on, because even then, he understood the fear of being lost to the system. It was only when they’d run stone-cold out of cash, that he’d tentatively tried to speak to his father, more than ready to give up some of the weight crushing his little shoulders.

And that was the night the beatings started.

Eric apologized after the first few times; cuddled him close and bought him ice-cream and promised he didn’t mean any of the words he’d said. After that, things just went back to the same, and he had stopped apologizing, and Jensen had stopped expecting him to stop.

Still, he stayed.
Jensen knew all too well that he’d be fine to look after himself. He could easily find a job, and he still had enough of a nest egg in his bank account to tide him over until he saw out his senior year, courtesy of his old art teacher’s wealthy best friend, who insisted on buying Jensen’s end of the year project; an oil painting of the sea at nightfall; and thereafter commissioning him to paint pictures for his wife’s dentistry practice. He’d have no problem getting an art scholarship and working and studying at the same time held no real challenge for him. People, Jensen knew, would never understand why he stayed, regardless of how obviously capable he was of taking care of himself. But Jensen never needed to explain to anyone, in any case, the one thing that kept him in an abusive home for 10 years.

Loyalty.

Not to Eric, no; that ship had sailed a decade ago. His loyalty laid with his foster mother, and the father Eric used to be. They had taken care of him and loved him for 8 years; this was the only way he could repay the favor. And keeping Eric alive? Making sure he had food and didn’t drink himself into a coma or suffocate on his own vomit? That was the only way Jensen could think of to honor the memory of the woman he called his mother.

So he stayed. Even when most nights saw him huddled in this very same position on his bed, he stayed.

For her.

###

“What the hell…” Chris trailed off, aghast, taking in his split lip and bruised cheekbone. His friend’s expression immediately turned furious. “Who did that to you, Jensen?” he demanded, blue eyes flashing.

“Relax, Chris,” Jensen soothed, touched deeply by his friend’s concern. Obviously the amount of time they’d known each other held no impact on the protectiveness the other boy felt over him. “I fell down the stairs, no big,” he lied easily, wincing slightly at how he was already lying to the only friend he had in this hell hole.

Chris saw the wince, and misinterpreted it. “Like hell you did, and like hell it isn’t,” he scowled, reaching out to clasp Jensen around the back of his neck. His touch was gentle, even as he applied the slightest hint of pressure to get Jensen to move his head. Sighing, Jensen resigned himself to his inspection, tilting his head whichever way Chris manipulated it until his friend had seen for himself that there was no lasting damage to his jaw or cheekbone. When he finally let go, Jensen stepped back, and hissed when the motion jarred his ribs. His hands automatically went to his abdomen and the motion didn’t escape Chris’s notice.

“‘It’s no big’ my ass,” he scoffed, advancing on Jensen with single-minded determination. Jensen panicked slightly, knowing that some of his other scars, both recent and not, would not be so easily dismissed.

“I’m fine, Chris,” he insisted, trying to dodge out of his way. “Really. Just clumsy, I guess.”

“Then why is your cheek bruised with the distinct impression of knuckles?” he shot back, the look of genuine concern in his eyes softening the sharpness of his words.

“Nothing is broken,” he tried to pacify, and Chris’s eyes narrowed in anger.

Before he could say anything though, there was an odd twisting deep in Jensen’s gut warning him of
something nasty, and not two seconds later, a hand was sliding around his waist and turning him
roughly around, pushing him none-too-gently into the lockers. Normally, it wouldn’t have pained in
the least, but when the hard, unforgiving metal was being pressed into his tender, searing ribs, he
doubled over with a grunt of pain. Abruptly, Chris’s hands were around his shoulder, supporting him
as he turned an icy glare to whoever it was that got frisky with him.

“Jake, you stupid asshole,” Chris snapped out a reprimand, steadying Jensen as he swayed slightly.

“Whoa, you can’t tell me the boy’s that much of a little bitch,” the boy sneered, holding his hands up.
Jensen gritted his teeth and forced himself to meet the jerk’s eyes, defiance flaring in his eyes.

“He’s hurt, you dick,” Chris bit out. Jake stepped towards him again, but that was as far as he got
before Chris had a hand scrunched in the lapel of his shirt, and Jake got his just desserts as Chris
slammed him against the lockers. “Don’t you even think about touching him,” he warned lowly, and
Jensen couldn’t help but feel fiercely grateful for his new friend’s protectiveness, because
God he couldn’t deal with a hormonal jock right now.

“Chris? Everything okay?” a smooth, deep voice cut through the air, and as if Jensen wasn’t already
having trouble breathing, Jared stepped into his view. Jensen watched as Jared’s eyes took in his
appearance, and the way he was still grasping at his ribs, and the warm hazel quickly turned fiery
with a repressed fury that Jensen couldn’t really understand. From Chris, it was unexpected, but
understandable. From Jared? It was a leap straight into twilight zone.

Flicking his eyes over Jensen’s form, and then glancing at Jake still trying to escape Chris’s grip,
Jared’s body was taut with anger, and Jensen wondered again what was going on. Not that it
mattered much at the moment, in the grand scheme of things, because right now all he could think of
was the barely there fluttering in his stomach that had nothing to do with his ribs, when he looked
into Jared’s blazing orbs.

Oh yes.

Jensen was well and truly screwed.

~* Jared *~

Rage burned through Jared as he took in the loud bruise on Jensen’s cheek and his busted lip, and it
didn’t ease any when the boy braced his arm against abdomen, shielding his ribs. Darting his eyes
between Jensen and Chris, Jared concluded from the lack of a fresh blood scent, that Jensen’s injury
hadn’t been caused by Jake.

But Chris had him pinned against the locker, so obviously, the guy had done something.

Forcing himself not to lose his temper, Jared coached his fists out of their automatic clench. Chris
abruptly let go of the boy’s collar, letting Jared deal with him in favor of checking on Jensen.

“I’m fine Chris, really, don’t worry,” he heard the soft, honey sweet voice reassuring the blue-eyed
alpha. “He barely touched me, just the impact hurt my side, is all.”

Barely touched him?

That meant that Jake had touched him. Even just barely, that was not acceptable. Nobody could
touch his Jensen; and Jared refused to acknowledge the possessive thought until he’d dealt with
Abel.

“Lay off, Jake,” he warned darkly, his voice low with threats that he had no qualms carrying out. He
allowed some of his Pack Alpha thrum to enter his voice and he got the desired effect, if maybe not with all the remorse in it.

“Of course,” Jake sneered. “Wouldn’t want to cross big bad Jay-Man and his little chew toy.”

“You wouldn’t,” Jared agreed coldly. “And he’s not a chew toy.”

“He’d make a damn good one, though,” Jake leered and Jared’s hackles rose. It was only the softest touch of a hand on his forearm, and the subsequent jolt of electricity that followed it, that stopped him from going Alpha on the arrogant dick in front of him.

“Let it go, Jared,” Jensen said quietly, squeezing his arm lightly. The man and wolf inside him purred at the contact and the honeysuckle drawl that made his name sound like a hallelujah chorus. Almost immediately, his temper subsided, and he turned to face Jensen, fighting the urge to cradle the boy’s face in his hands. The bruise there sent his blood pressure sky-rocketing once more, but he controlled it better this time, thanks in large part to the warm hand still grasping his.

“What happened to you?” he managed to get out, with some semblance of an even tone.

“Played face hockey with a stairwell that wasn’t nearly impressed with my skills,” he shrugged it off lightly. Unease and anger pulsed a jagged rhythm through Jared as he acknowledged the obvious lie—which meant, that Jensen was afraid of someone. And, Jared was willing to bet, afraid of what more fist-shaped and other bruises could litter his perfect body. There was a physical ache in his chest as he yearned to protect the gorgeous guy in front of him from whatever crap he’d had to deal with.

If there was ever any doubt before, there wasn’t any now. This boy was his mate. Human? Yes. Gorgeous? Undoubtedly. About to become Jared’s everything? Come hell or high water. Hard to obtain? Unfortunately. Someone to give up on? Not in a million years.

Jared was going to win over Jensen’s trust, and then his friendship, and then his heart. He was determined to.

Raising his hand slowly so as not to startle Jensen, he brushed the tips of his fingers as gently as a butterfly’s wings over the angry bruise. Maybe it was Jared’s imagination, but he liked to think that Jensen leaned almost imperceptibly into the touch. He lowered his voice to a murmur that only Jensen could hear, not even wanting Chris to be privy to their conversation.

“If the stairwell ever has anything else to say, you tell me,” he said; the fervor in his voice had Jensen looking up at him in surprise and doubt. “You tell me, and we’ll sort it out together. Same goes with Abel. He won’t come near you now, I’ll make sure of it.”

Running his fingers lightly across Jensen’s jaw one last time, Jared had to force himself to leave.

It was time to put some measures into place. Jensen was not going to get hurt again, if Jared had anything to say about it.

His mate would be safe.

He would make sure of it.
Chapter Notes

Many thanks once again to everyone who left comments and/or kudos! Special thanks to j2_is_my_life, a reader whose comments really gave me fuzzies and prompted my working very hard to get this chapter out quickly. To you, girl! :)

~*Jensen*~

The rest of the week passed by almost anticlimactically. Chris didn’t even try to be discreet as he roved his eyes over Jensen every morning, looking for any new bruises. He’d offered every day to give Jensen a ride home, never deterred by receiving negative answers each time; it wasn’t that Jensen didn’t appreciate the offer, and appreciate the concern behind it even more, it was just that he didn’t want Chris to know where he lived. If Chris knew, and came by unannounced, there was a snowball’s chance in hell that Eric would be sober and a heart-warming host. Jensen didn’t want Chris to get involved in that, as he undoubtedly would, and so it just proved easier to keep him in the dark about it.

To keep everyone in the dark about it.

Jared had let the matter go, but Jensen knew he knew that it was no accident. The only silver lining was that both Chris and Jared seemed to think it was the work of a bully or a mugging turned violent. That aside, Jared had been the epitome of charming and suave every Chemistry lesson, and Jensen found himself looking forward to those periods more and more. Jared even made a point of making a little small talk every morning at homeroom, and it was quickly becoming Jensen’s favorite way to start off the day.

Not that he was falling for the guy or anything.

Jake and his crew were steering clear of him, but the looks they sent him made Jensen thoroughly grateful of their lack of a fatal after-effect. His father had behaved the past few days, likely because work had tired him out, and things were calm. Jensen didn’t drop his guard, no, but he could at least breathe a little now.

###

“Jensen!”

Chris’ yell had Jensen stopping immediately in his tracks. He turned with a grin and waited patiently for his friend to catch up with him. He chuckled as people parted to make way for him; for someone so awesome once you got to know him, people were pretty scared of the blue-eyed boy, in a way that Jensen couldn’t for the life of him understand. Chris had been nothing but friendly and cool to him since he’d been there, but at the same time, it seemed like Jensen was the only one he could be like that around. Even with Jared’s crew, Chris was the strong and silent type, only seeming to relax once they were alone again.

“I’m never going to get in with Sophia,” Chris grumbled as soon as he was in earshot. Jensen laughed.
“Maybe you should stop being so broody and actually talk to her in Chemistry, Romeo,” he teased with a grin, earning himself a scowl and a light shove.

“I talk!” Chris protested with a frown.

“Telling her to pass you the lead nitrate solution doesn’t count.”

“It’s words, and I spoke them, didn’t I?!” he elbowed Jensen softly, casting a hurt look at him.

“When are you going to man the fuck up and admit you’re crazy about her, and actually try to converse with her?” Jensen asked with gentle chiding.

“When are you going to admit you like Jared and actually agree to the dates he’s always asking you on?” Chris shot back.

It was true; Jared had been persistent in his offer to show Jensen around, offering every day at the end of Chemistry, and Jensen in turn, had been persistent in his declination. Jensen suspected he was no closer to giving up than he had been since day one, and he couldn’t help wonder why that made him so happy. Suspicious, sure, but definitely happy too.

“I don’t like Jared,” he replied easily, ignoring the bitter taste of lies at the back of his throat. “I don’t know Jared enough to like him.”

Not true. Not really, at least. Jared had taken every opportunity to get Jensen to know him, answering any questions Jensen asked in great detail, and often offering up little snippets of information voluntarily, all the details of which Jensen had stored in an airtight vault in his head. The boy was fascinating, a conundrum of the stereotypical jock. He was gentle where he should have been rough, kind and loving where he should have been mocking and aloof. The only time that he had deviated from the gentle giant, was with Jake on Monday, and since that was aimed at protecting him, Jensen had no real objection. But none of this meant Jensen liked him…right? He just so happened to notice the way Jared’s warm hazel eyes sparkled when he laughed, or smiled genuinely. Just so happened to notice the dimples that were far too adorable on his glass-cut face, and notice the way he ran his hands through his hair when he was nervous, making his floppy hair stand up a little more than normal.

Those were just things he noticed. So there.

“I call bullshit,” Chris snorted. “You actually look forward to Chemistry, and call it personal experience, but there’s only one reason for that,” Chris winked.

“I look forward to Chemistry because I’m a good student,” Jensen shot back, mock-pretentiously. Make no mistake; Jensen really did love Chemistry. It was his favorite subject next to art; he loved the logic of it. The sense of it. There was always something that can be controlled, some solution that could make everything react exactly the way you needed it to. Jared’s presence in the class just exponentially increased Jensen’s original love of the subject. Having the admittedly gorgeous and gentle giant there to keep him company was something he could never have foreseen loving.

“Sure,” Chris rolled his eyes, “whatever’s gonna get you to bed tonight, Freckles.”

Before Jensen could scowl at his friend for the increasing use of that nickname, a voice called out;

“Yo, Jenny-Baby, did it hurt when you fell from heaven?”

A smile from ear-to-ear split across Jensen’s face at the familiar voice. Happiness flared like wild fire in his chest as he turned around, all his inhibitions as the new kid falling away at the voice he had
been missing for the past week.

“No, but it sure hurt crawling all the way back up from hell, fucker,” he retorted, abandoning his books and starting towards the figure in the trench-coat.

Meeting him mid-way, Jensen returned the bear hug he was on the receiving end of. His old friend thumped him on the back and hugged him even tighter.

“Man, Jen, I’ve missed you,” he laughed, holding on for several seconds longer.

“Missed you too, Cas,” Jensen admitted. The week passed was the longest he was away from his best friend in 5 years. They let go of each other at Chris’ unsubtle cough.

“Hi,” Chris regarded Cas carefully. Jensen was reminded that his new friend wasn’t as comfortable around everyone else as he was with him, and he made a mental note to make sure that Chris was fine after all this.

“Chris, meet Cas, he was my best friend back home,” Jensen introduced. He only hesitated a split second before adding, “Cas, this is Chris, best friend from new home.”

It was definitely worth it for the small, but genuine smile that spread over Chris’ face. And honestly, it was only fair; Chris had been every bit the best friend Cas had been even if it was in a fraction of the time.

“Nice to meet you, man,” Cas grinned, shaking Chris’ proffered hand.

“Good to meet you too,” Chris offered another small smile before turning to face Jensen. “I’m gonna head on home,” he told him, punching him lightly in the arm and mussing up his hair a little, making Jensen grin and duck, batting away the offending arm.

“I’ll see you Monday,” Jensen nodded, sending his friend a broad grin which was promptly returned.

Turning to face Cas, he was met with blue eyes sparkling with uninhibited mischief. “Let’s get this weekend started, Jen!”

###

True to form, Cas was in the mood to mingle, and quite frankly, if it would keep him away from the house and Eric any longer, Jensen was all in. They were at home for all of 20 minutes to give Jensen a chance to change before they left to explore the town.

Deciding on a movie, it was like falling back into an old and familiar rhythm; Jensen got the popcorn and drinks, and Cas got the tickets, and they spent the entire movie mocking every single aspect of it. Worth every last cent, in Jensen’s humble opinion.

Not ready to call it a night, they wandered aimlessly around town, using the time to catch up.

“So…you’re gonna tell me why you have a split lip?” Cas asked gently. Thankfully, the bruise over his cheek had faded over the days and with the help of a little foundation he had for just such occasions, it was invisible, and he had gotten used enough to the pain in his side to walk without raising too much suspicion.

“I fell,” he shrugged, careful not to meet his old friend’s eyes. “It’s no big. Tell me what’s been happening at home.”
If he suspected the reason for the abrupt subject change, Cas sure as hell didn’t show it. “Oh, nothing much,” he said with forced airiness that immediately put Jensen on his guard, “Jimmy broke his ankle ice-skating and got mocked mercilessly for it, Adam’s been asking after you, and have you heard that Ruby got knocked up by Kevin? I swear that girl was always trying to prove that she wasn’t the stereotypical preacher’s daughter.”

But there was really only one part in that sentence that caught his attention. “Adam’s been asking after me?” he asked, gaping. If the tingle in his face was any indication, he had paled spectacularly.

Adam was Jensen’s first and only boyfriend, and in the spirit of Fate never giving him a fucking break, it had gone from a bed of roses to a bed of nails in the time it took for a Bugatti Veyron to go from 0 to 60.

At the beginning, Adam was all charm; sweet and caring and romantic and loving, so much so that Jensen ignored any misgivings he had about him, chalkling his unease up to a lifetime of abuse. Things stayed peachy for a while; they got close, and Jensen felt for the first time that maybe, just maybe, he might be good enough to be loved. Might be worth being loved. The hot and heavy make-out sessions were true to their name and the level of concern Adam always showed him was one he hadn’t been exposed to since the accident.

And then there was the jealousy. He had been obsessively jealous, hated all of Jensen’s friends and insisted on knowing exactly where Jensen was at all times. Jensen hated it, and once, he had adamantly refused to return Adam’s calls. That hadn’t been the tipping point though; it had been when Jensen went to find him at the school gym, and found him all but fucking Gabe Richards, the school’s notorious drummer boy and lead singer of a band. Instead of apologizing, Adam had screamed that he deserved it for sneaking around.

When Jensen had told him it was over? That was when the violence that was almost synonymous with Jensen’s lifestyle came into the equation.

Adam had lost it and Jensen had been left with another few scars to add to his mounting collection. Nobody, not even Cas, knew that part of the story. To everyone it was a simple case of Adam cheating, and Jensen intended on keeping it like that. There was no need for anything else to come from it, never mind the fact that admitting to what happened, would have opened a can of worms about Eric that Jensen simply wasn’t equipped to handle.

“Yeah,” Cas nodded, pulling Jensen from his memories. “He’s been badgering me about getting your number or something, he said he wants you back.”

Jensen gulped. “That’s not going to happen,” he insisted quietly.

“I know,” Cas nodded patiently. “But that doesn’t change the fact that he’s looking to get back together. What, do you have some guy here?”

A blush colored Jensen’s cheeks, and an image of Jared and that damning smile and dimples rose unbidden in his mind. Before he could ream himself a new one for allowing his thoughts to go there, Cas pounced.

“Oh my God, there is a guy here!” he gasped. “You been holding out on me, J?”

“There isn’t a guy,” Jensen feebly denied. “He’s just my friend.”

“Wait, that Chris guy?” Cas asked, frowning. “Because I gotta tell you, man, he seemed straight to me.”
“He is,” Jensen confirmed, “but he’s not the guy I was thinking about.”

“So there is a guy on your mind!” Cas crowed. “Tell me.”

“His name’s Jared,” Jensen revealed reluctantly. “And he really is just a friend. He’s not interested in me like that, and I’m not going to let myself get interested in him like that either.”

“Not everyone is Adam, Jensen,” Cas cautioned him, uncharacteristically serious. “It’s okay to trust someone and let yourself like someone.”

“Sure, sure, Dr. Love,” Jensen teased lightly, unwilling to get into this same discussion for the umpteenth and second time. “Let’s go grab a bite to eat.”

They headed towards the diner they saw up ahead. “You know,” Cas started, the sparkle in his eyes reigniting, “I finally managed to convince Meg to see a movie with me Sunday.”

“You’re kidding me!” Jensen clapped his friend on the back in enthused happiness. Cas had been crushing on Meg for years, and Jensen was happy for his best friend. “Why didn’t you start the conversation off with that?”

“I didn’t want you to get jealous,” he declared, holding one hand to his heart and the other reaching dramatically towards Jensen. “You know you’re still my one and only, Jenny-Bear!”

Half the diner turned to look at them at that.

And for the life of him, Jensen just couldn’t give a damn about it.

~*Jared*~

Jared had to almost physically fight down the urge to hit the annoying brunette right in his stupid smiling mouth.

Seriously? Jenny-Bear? What the fuck kind of nickname was that? And since when was Jensen seeing someone?

Jared paid his sister only half an ear of his attention, his attention caught and held by the roughhousing Jensen and his pretty-boy boyfriend were indulging in, uncaring of the eyes that were on them.

“You wanna soda, Megz?” Jared asked abruptly. “I’m going to get you a soda.” Leaving his sister confused and clueless at their booth, he marched up to where Jensen and his date stood. “Hey Jen.”

Jensen turned, and damn if his form fitting black jeans and plain black V-neck tee wasn’t going to play a role in Jared’s jerk-off fantasies. The old, worn black leather jacket? An almost sinful touch. His big green eyes widened slightly in surprise and his breathing quickened a shade of a pace.

“Jared!” he managed to get out, almost as though he were choking on his own tongue. “What are you doing here?”

“Jared’s taking me to a movie after dinner!” Megan’s voice piped up from behind him, and in retrospect, Hell would have frozen over before Jared’s baby sister missed out on an opportunity to do the polar opposite of what he’d asked.

Jared watched as Jensen’s stunning green orbs dimmed significantly as he took in Megan. A hurt look flashed across his face and Jared wanted nothing more than to make it go away.
Then Pretty Boy decided to sling an arm around Jensen’s shoulders and that, Jared thought, could unanimously be considered the mistake of the day. Because Jared could see how Jensen tensed, in the second before his friend made contact. And truly, he was already on thin ice. But the possibility that he’d ever hurt Jensen?

Then it was game fucking over.

Before he could consciously realize his actions, Pretty Boy was getting real cozy with the wall and Jared’s forearm against his throat, and Jensen was yelling over the sound of the low growl rumbling in his chest.

“...off of him, Jared! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

Jared used as much willpower as he could muster and pulled away from Pretty Boy.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on with you, Padalecki,” Jensen said shortly, fixing blazing green eyes on him. “But you better get it the hell sorted out.” He flicked his chin in the direction of Megan. “Your date is waiting for you.”

Turning around, Jensen stalked out with Pretty Boy, leaving Jared floundering and apologetic in equal measure.

Okay. So Jared had a shitload of things he had to make right.

###
Hot Shots

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for the amazing support! You guys rock! Some hot ’n heavy for you guys!! Enjoy!

~*Jensen*~

Storming out of a diner proved difficult to do while dragging your lug of a best friend behind you, but Jensen was never one to be deterred by a challenge.

It was painful to leave Jared angry, but it was near impossible to leave him angry without looking back. There was a lump in Jensen’s throat that he couldn’t quite understand and the bitter feeling of disappointment that he understood all too well.

Because sadly enough, it wasn’t the first time he’d liked a guy who already had a gorgeous girlfriend.

But this time was different. This was Jared and Jared was…Jared was all that and a bag of fucking chips. Even if Jensen didn’t want to admit it, the tall, muscular, charismatic boy had gotten under his skin in the biggest way. Who wouldn’t like him? More to the point, who would ever be stupid enough to give him up?

So Jensen had effectively just lost any miniscule chance with Jared that he ever may or may not have had, and in yelling at him, had also just lost one of his only two friends. And when Chris heard he’d gone mental on Jared? Would Chris still want to be friends? Or did he just single-handedly stick a neon bright label on his forehead written all in caps that said “SOCIAL OUTCAST”?

Ok. So maybe Jensen understood the lump in his throat after all.

“Jensen, stop,” Cas’ firm voice finally filtered through Jensen’s mile-a-minute thoughts. He gripped both of Jensen’s forearms tightly, aiming sympathetic, saddened eyes at him. “I’m sorry, man,” he said lowly. “I’m sorry. Look, he seemed like he was a douche anyway, you’re better off.”

Jensen couldn’t find it in himself to nod; instead, he found himself fighting the urge to defend Jared. Jared was a great guy; it wasn’t his fault that Jensen seemed to bring out the worst in people.

“Let’s just go,” he said glumly. “I can fix you something to eat. I’m not really hungry anymore.”

Cas nodded, his brow furrowing and his mouth upturned in concern. They weren’t walking for three minutes when a shout of his name had Jensen turning instinctively for the third time that day.

“JENSEN!” Jared was running to them. “Jensen, wait please,” he called, a tinge of desperation entering his voice. Jensen was caught between two decisions- leave, or wait?- when the choice was made for him.

“If you’re going to keep being an asshat, you can just stay the hell away from him,” Cas barked, coming to stand in front of Jensen. Jared’s features darkened in anger, but he stopped, a few tantalizingly close steps away from Jensen.
“I just want to talk to him,” Jared said tightly. “Alone.”

“What, you’re not just going to push me into a wall again?” Cas sneered. “And no, you can’t talk to him. You’ve done enough already.”

“Lay off, Cas,” Jensen butted in, not unkindly. Damn if Jared’s puppy-dog eyes and the sincerity and sadness in his tone hadn’t had a direct link to Jensen’s heart. “It’s a free country.”

Jensen walked away from Cas, towards the direction of the diner again. Once they’d walked several paces, Jared pulled him into a little alley he hadn’t even noticed in his haste to get away.

“I’m sorry,” Jared apologized immediately. “Man, Jen, I’m sorry.”

Jensen felt a pleasant jolt at the nickname that sounded somehow different, somehow special coming out of his mouth. “I think you’re apologizing to the wrong person, Jared.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, hazel eyes boring into Jensen’s green. “I didn’t mean to put you in that position.”

“So you’re not sorry for slamming Cas up against a wall?” Jensen asked, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” Jared answered simply, honestly. Jensen adopted his patented “WTF?” expression and waited patiently for Jared to elaborate. “You flinched,” Jared said finally, matter-of-factly. “Before he put his arm around you. The thought that he might have hurt you at some point…” Jared’s voice turned low and deep. “It made me go a little nuts. Plus,” his face colored slightly now, “he put his arm around you. I may or may not have gotten crazy jealous. Anyway, I’m sorry I ruined your date. I never meant to upset you.”

“Wait, my date?!” Jensen’s voice was incredulous, turning even more so when the rest of the sentence caught up with him. “Jealous? You were jealous?”

“Yeah, on both counts,” Jared mumbled subdued. Jensen fumbled for a second, suddenly wanting for nothing more than to see Jared’s signature grin, dimples flashing and eyes sparkling.

“Wrong on both counts,” he corrected gently. “Cas and I were not on a date, and we’re not an item. Cas is my best friend- my very straight best friend- from back home. He’s visiting till tomorrow. Besides I guess I don’t blame you; I seem to bring out the worst in people.” Jensen cringed.

“But…” Jared frowned in adorable confusion. “Ok, first of all, don’t think we’re not coming back to the little statement,” he narrowed his eyes. “Also…Jenny-Bear?”

“I’ve yet to prove it conclusively, but I think Cas was born to the sole purpose of annoying the hell out of me,” Jensen answered mock seriously. “And that includes using nicknames I’ve, in no uncertain terms, expressly forbidden.”

“You aren’t dating him?” Jared asked for confirmation. And ahh! There was that smile.

“That would be a resounding no.”

“I would have known that had I waited long enough for an introduction, huh?” Jared grinned ruefully.

“That would be a resounding yes.”

Try as he might, Jensen couldn’t keep the small smile off his face. When a sudden twinkle appeared
in Jared’s darkening eyes, electricity shot down Jensen’s spine.

Before he knew what was happening, Jensen found himself crowded against the wall, the length of Jared’s toned body hovering half a millimeter over his own, smaller body, Jared’s hands on the wall at the sides of Jensen’s head, boxing him in. Even with the proximity blasting Jared’s body heat into him, Jensen shivered.

“You should know,” Jared murmured, his sweet, hot breath snaking down Jensen’s neck as Jared inclined his head. “Megan? My sister. Not a date, either. Also?” Jared leaned in closer, his lips in brushing distance of the lower curve of Jensen’s jaw, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I really like you, Jen.” Jensen’s breath hitched as Jared brushed his lips ever so lightly against the tender skin above the pulse point in his neck. “I really like you,” he repeated huskily, pressing a harder kiss to the spot just below Jensen’s ear and moving in even closer, so that Jensen was pressed tightly between the wall and Jared’s very warm, very firm body. With Jared trailing a line of kisses down his jaw, Jensen was a quivering mass of wantneedpleasenow by the time Jared reached the corner of his mouth.

“Jared?” the wrecked whisper escaped Jensen’s mouth without his express permission. It was only now that Jensen realized he’d closed his eyes; opening them revealed a hungry looking Jared, his pupils blown almost black as they zeroed in on Jensen’s lips. With a magic all their own, Jensen’s lips began to burn with the fervor to be pressed against Jared’s. Jared almost came undone, his jeans becoming tighter and his neck flushing. “Fuck, please,” he moaned involuntarily, rolling his hips and gasping when he brushed lightly against Jared’s own hardening crotch. Jared’s dark chuckle rumbled low in his chest and his hands shot down from their position on the wall, gripping both Jensen’s wrists and forcing his arms above his head, pinning them there.

“Right here?” Jared growled, rocking sensually slow into Jensen and effectively pinning him even tighter against the wall, much to Jensen’s pleasure. “Right now? What would people say?” he teased, rocking again, harder this time, slipping one muscled thigh between his legs. Jensen’s teeth sank into his lower lip as a muffled, keening sound came choked out of his throat.

“Fucking tease,” Jensen breathed, losing all remaining scraps of coherency.

“Jen?” Jared’s groan was also a little breathless. “Will you let me show you around town a little? Come out with me and the gang tomorrow night.”

The same offer every Chemistry lesson, but damn if it wasn’t all about the delivery.

“Yuh-huh, fine,” Jensen agreed mindlessly. Honestly? He would have agreed to invade a third world country if Jared had asked just then, if he would just move those lips a fraction to the right.

The blood in Jensen’s veins sang and burned with success as Jared finally- fucking finally!- pressed his lips hard against Jensen’s mouth. Nipping lightly at Jensen’s bottom lip, it didn’t take much before Jensen opened, granting Jared admission.

Jared wasted no time, plunging his tongue into Jensen’s mouth, hot and skilled. Jensen gasped into the kiss, the sound muffled by Jared’s attack as he plundered Jensen’s mouth. Jensen rocked against Jared’s thigh and Jared growled again before pulling Jensen’s bottom lip into his mouth and sucking hard on it. Jensen’s strangled moan was swallowed by Jared’s mouth and he bucked impatiently as Jared’s thigh brushed against his hard-on.

“The sound of Cas’ approaching voice quickly cast them back to reality and Jared pulled languidly away, his expression screaming hunger and lust even as his smile was mischievous. Jensen didn’t even want to think about how he looked right then.
Cas stopped at the mouth of the alley, staring at them in suspicion. Jensen kept his head down, one hand grasping the back of his very heated neck.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night at the diner at say, 7:30?” Jared broke the silence as he backed away from Jensen. Picking up his head to meet Jared’s eyes, he caught the saucy wink directed at him and blushed all over again. “You should bring Chris and Trench Coat over there too,” he called out, shoving his hands in his pockets and grinning again, before walking away.

Without looking at Cas, Jensen stepped out of the alley and walked in the opposite direction, knowing Cas would follow him.

“What the hell just happened?” Cas spluttered, coming from behind him. He took in Jensen’s flushed face and bruised lips and grinned wolfishly. “He’s not straight, is he?” Cas asked gleefully.

“Nope,” Jensen answered, popping the ‘p’ sound with a smile of his own. “No, he is not.”

###

Jensen guessed that maybe Fate had found another soul to torture for a little while, because she was giving him a break for once. They had gotten home to find a note from Eric, saying that he’d be out the whole weekend on a business trip, and so Jensen could safely have Cas there without worrying about the repercussions.

It was difficult saying goodbye to Cas the next night. It had been a blast and a half having him around, but he had to get back for his date with Meg. He promised to try to visit again soon, which Jensen took some comfort in.

All too soon, it was 7.23, and Jensen was getting into Chris’ slightly beat-up truck. Chris had agreed to go out with them, on account of the fact that he wasn’t about to let Jensen go without any back-up, so together, they were headed to the diner. In a further attempt to keep Chris away from his house, they’d agreed to meet at the school gate, and Chris would drive them there.

“What happened?” Chris asked suspiciously as he climbed in, by way of greeting. “You’ve been turning Jared down the entire week, literally. What happened yesterday?”

Jensen couldn’t help the small smile that broke over his face. “He wore me down,” he answered casually, biting down hard on his lower lip in an attempt to reign in his totally irrational and probably one-sided feelings. Jared said what he did, probably just in an attempt to get Jensen to agree to go out. And to kiss him. And he was obviously successful on both counts; Jensen just wasn’t sure to what end, exactly.

Maybe he thought it was a sure-fire way to a good Chemistry grade? Yeah. That must have been it. Though saddened by it, Jensen could deal with it; he was more familiar with this, being used as a means to an end.

But his heart wasn’t.

Before he actually fell for Jared, he’d have to find a way to let the sinfully gorgeous guy know that Jensen would take care of their Chemistry grade; that the shenanigans were totally unnecessary and that Jared could just go back to his unlawfully sexy existence, thank you very much.

The thoughts quickly dissipated his good mood vibes, but again, at least it was familiar, and therefore safer than to hope or believe or, God forbid, lower his walls. Chris kept shooting him worried glances, almost as though he were aware of the rapidly depressing turn of thoughts in Jensen’s mind.
“Any idea what tonight’s plans are?” Jensen asked, redirecting his efforts from Jared-proofing his walls to artfully side-stepping his new best friend’s all-too-perceptive concerns.

“We’ll probably head to the Rec centre three streets down; it’s got the pool and darts and almost everything you could imagine in the way of fun, with all the intoxication availability of a church. Everything except booze is served.” Chris rolled his eyes. “If only they knew that we all had fake IDs and drank anyway.”

Despite himself, Jensen snorted. “Fake IDs are worth their weight in gold,” he agreed. God knew he needed to get into bars before; even if it was just to fetch his near comatose, paralytic drunk foster father.

“Good to know I won’t be the one to corrupt your innocence,” Chris smirked, chuckling lightly when Jensen gave him a one-fingered salute.

Jensen tried to hide his nerves about meeting Jared’s friends, but if Chris standing protectively at his side was any indication, he wasn’t succeeding. Jared’s face lit up with a smile when he saw them, and Jensen experienced a further moment of panic when he realized that he wasn’t sure how to greet him, especially now that he’d decided to call Jared on his bluff.

Side-skirting Jared’s arms reaching for him and ignoring the hurt look blooming on the line-backer’s face, Jensen leaned into Chris, once again grateful for the blue-eyed boy’s protective nature. Chris shook his head slightly at Jared, and he backed off, albeit reluctantly and with a tempered glare at Chris.

“Let’s go meet everyone,” Chris suggested evenly, not removing his solid presence from Jensen’s side, but not taking his eyes of Jared either. Jared nodded once, jaw clenched tightly, and led the way to the almost overflowing booths at the back.

“Jensen, I’m sure you know most of them,” Jared aimed a warm smile at him, “but in any case, this is Misha, Danneel, Sandy, Genevieve, Tom, Milo and Chad.” Jensen got an assortment of responses from the respective people as they were introduced. “Guys, this is Jensen.”

“I feel like I need to get this out of the way, before things get awkward,” a small brunette-Genevieve, if short-term memory served- announced. “Jensen,” she turned to him with a frank look on her pretty face. “You’re freaking gorgeous.”

Jensen coughed, choking a little on what may or may not have been his tongue.

“Fine as hell,” Danneel agreed with a nod, as though they were discussing the weather.

“Sex on legs!” Misha’s contribution earned a downright splutter from Jensen as he turned bright red, and a low rumble that could have been a growl escaped Jared’s mouth, while Chris just smirked.

“Um…thank you?” Jensen shrugged, aiming a half smile at the dopey looking boy and the now-giggling girls.

“You’re very welcome,” Misha grinned sunnily. The boy was either blissfully ignorant, or totally uncaring of the heated glare Jared was sending his way, but whichever it was, Jensen thought it was best for Misha’s sense of security that he didn’t see the blatant threats being directed at him.

Jensen smiled and raked his gaze over the group again, trying to suss out what he could from their demeanor.

Judging from the lazy smile Tom was aiming at him, the tall, well-built boy welcomed him with open
arms, and the same could be said about the grinning Misha and the easy-going Danneel and Genevieve. The blond guy next to Tom- Chad, was it?- didn’t smile, but he didn’t look hostile either; he was looking at Jensen as though he were trying to figure something out. He looked wary, and cautious, as though he wanted to give Jensen the benefit of doubt, but couldn’t until he actually knew him. On the complete opposite pole to Tom and the others, the stunning girl Jared introduced as Sandy looked at Jensen with downright disdain. She did little to hide her contempt, and Jensen wondered what he could possibly have done to make the pretty brunette dislike him so much, so quickly. The last guy sitting next to Misha- Milo, it took Jensen a second to remember- seemed to pay him little to no attention, in favor of casting dreamy looks at Sandy. Jensen wondered idly whether anyone had even noticed yet, how madly in love Milo was with the cold girl.

“So, green-eyes,” Chad called out, his voice a mixture of breezy and challenging, “you play any pool?”

###

Chris’ assumption proved to be spot on as they entered Impala; the owner, Sam Colt, had opened it as a place “for the youth of this generation to have some clean fun” in, so as per its reputation, there was no booze.

Jensen sat on the edge of their large booth, with Chris on his right, sipping a Coke and trying to studiously avoid Jared’s eyes from where they bore into him from across the table. Tom was playing pool against Chad, and was losing dismally, much to the glowing satisfaction of the blond boy.

“And that’s the game, Wellings,” Chad crowed smugly as he sank the 8-ball in. Chad, the girls had told Jensen, had been unbeatable since they’d started coming to Impala. Jensen played a fair game himself- something about playing for stakes higher than bragging rights when Eric bit off more than he could chew- but he didn’t want to attract attention to himself, so he declined the offer to play in favor of observing. Chad played well; years of hustling as a way to make ends meet allowed Jensen to suss out when he was being had, and it also allowed him to appreciate a good player when he saw one, and Chad had some skill.

“Green-eyes!” the man in question raised a challenging hand, curling his fingers twice inwards in a blatant invitation, smirking almost mockingly. “You’re next.”

“I’m good,” Jensen tried to wave him off, even as everyone burst into noise, some encouraging him to go, some telling Chad to give him a break.

“Come on, Newbie,” Chad goaded. “What’s the bet I school your pretty-boy ass?”

Jared growled at that, before Jensen had a chance to react. “He said he didn’t want to, Chad,” Jared said hardly, flashing the blond boy a glare.

“Pretty-boy can’t talk for himself, Jay-Man?” Chad shot back, and judging from the shocked looks around him, it was unexpected. Jared tensed angrily, and Jensen clenched his fists in response.

Jensen could appreciate the back-up, but at the moment, the dominant feeling was annoyance. He didn’t need anyone shielding him; he’d been fine 10 years without it. He felt more irritation at Jared than he knew was fair, but damn if he’d act like some damsel that needed big strong Jared’s protection.

“Rack ‘em up,” he said, swallowing the last bit of his Coke and steadfastly refusing to meet Jared’s eyes as the tension broke, noise bubbling up again in the acceptance of the challenge.
“I’m sorry, man,” Tom grinned amicably at Jensen, ignoring Jared’s anger, “but I’ve got ten on Chad.”

“Me too,” Genevieve piped up.

“Five on Chad,” Danneel grinned apologetically at Jensen.

“Looks like nobody’s willing to bet on Jared’s little Chemistry buff.” Sandy sneered, effectively insulting Jensen and simultaneously reminding him of exactly what he meant to the hazel-eyed boy. Jensen flinched, and Chris’ arm slung casually over him in a protective embrace.

“I would,” he defended, glaring frostily at Sandy. “In fact, I’m betting on Jensen, and matching every one’s bet, who bet on Chad.”

Jensen’s eyes widened as he glanced at his friend; Chris grinned at him in reassurance, and Jensen felt warmth flood his chest.

So this was what it was like having someone believe in you. Be willing to bet on you. Be in your corner, even without knowing whether you could deliver.

He had originally planned to take Chad close, hustle enough to show some level of skill, but ultimately let Chad take the game.

But now?

Now, Jensen’s friend- his best friend- had bet on it. Bet on him. The stakes were on. And Jensen knew how to play the pressure, and this time, he didn’t even have to hustle.

He got up slowly, stopping only when a low voice added to the fray.

“I’m with Kane. Ten on Jensen.”

He didn’t dare to look back at Jared as the words were spoken, but he felt determination fill him again. As he took the cue and started chalking it up, he sent an almost feral, cold and calculating smile at Chad.

This was gonna be good.

~*Jared*~

Jared’s mouth dried as Jensen started chalking up the cue, resting it lightly between his thighs.

*If only he could be that fucking cue.*

When Jensen sent that smile at Chad, and when he leaned down, back arched in a sexy curve, cue lightly gripped in his hands, looking for all the world as a predator on the prowl, damn if all the blood in Jared’s body rushed rapidly south. With a rough flick of his arm, the balls went scattering over the table, two sinking immediately. The table went silent, and Chad glanced at Jensen, slack-jawed.

Ignoring the look, Jensen bent down even further, his legs spread wide and his ass jutting out in a way that made Jared ponder the feasibility of pounding into him right here and now. All traces of uncertainty were gone as Jensen took deep breaths and shot effortlessly, dropping another ball. He moved around the table with undeniable grace, eyes focused and calculating as he roved his gaze over the table. When he perched himself on the edge of the table and brought the pool stick to rest
against the small of his back, and his hips pushed out just so to allow him to take the shot without being hindered, Jared had to literally shift to the edge of his seat and, under the poor coverage of the table, press the heel of his palm on to his increasingly interested cock, in an attempt to will his erection away.

Jensen glances sharply up at Chad suddenly, and as though he were coming back to awareness, relaxed his posture slightly, looking a little less predator than before. When he missed the next shot narrowly, Jared was willing to bet it was deliberate, and from a look at Chad and Chris, they seem to think so too. Chad took a few shots and sunk a few balls, getting ahead of Jensen by one ball before he messed up. By the look on his usually smug face, he knew that he’d as good as lost now.

The slightest hint of a smirk played on Jensen’s lips as he got back to work, clearing up the table in a show of demolition that did very little to help the growing problem in Jared’s pants. To sink the 8-ball, Jensen had to reach right across the pool table, and the way he splayed out, the combination of him lying against the table and his ass sticking out so invitingly, nearly made Jared lose it right there. With the slightest flip of his wrist, the ball rolled smoothly over the table. Jensen straightened and held out the cue to Chad, without even turning to look at the almost poetic way in which he pocketed the black ball and took the game; it was one of the hottest things ever, that Jensen didn’t even question whether it would go in.

Everyone was silent for a few seconds. Chad looked dumbstruck, and Jared felt a stab of satisfaction; Jared knew Chad had been giving Jensen a hard time as a messed up way of protecting him, but he deserved to be put in his place, the fucker.

Jensen stopped next to Chad, leaning against the pool table, his face down and his arms crossed, facing away from Jared’s long-time best friend.

“By the way,” he said in a low voice, friendly, and slightly amused. “My name? Not green-eyes. It’s Jensen.” He knocked his knuckles twice on the pool table as he shoved off it, sauntering to the table.

Jared grinned as the catcalls and shouts ratcheted up from his friends. Gen and Danni were squealing, uncaring of the money they had lost, while Tom was irritably impressed. Sandy was sulking after her little bitch-fit backfired, and Chris was beaming, grabbing Jensen around the cuff of his neck and pulling him into a one-armed hug of sorts.

“That’s my boy,” he laughed, ruffling Jensen’s hair, and if Jared wanted to stick out his leg and trip Chris like they were in kindergarten again, well then that would just be an unfortunate incident. “Pay up, suckers!”

Money exchanges hands, and Jared doesn’t even glance at what he’s given before he pockets it. He didn’t need the money; getting to watch Jensen like that would have been worth losing that tenner over. As Jensen smiled indulgently at Chris’ gloating, Jared got the feeling that he wouldn’t have shown his true skill if not for the fact that Chris had bet on him.

“Yo, Jensen,” Chad called out, a genuine smile now lighting his features. “No more stakes. But I definitely want a rematch.”

Jensen’s answering smile would have made a Greek God jealous.

After schooling Chad in a few more games, they decided to play doubles.

“Okay, look,” Chad grinned suddenly at him, and Jared swore inwardly at the look he recognized all too well. “Wellings and I versus Jensen and Jay-Man.”
“That’s not fair,” Chris protested immediately, casting an apologetic look at Jared. “We all know Jared’s hopeless at pool. You’re setting Jensen up because he’s new.” Chris frowned slightly, and Jared was once again baffled by the protectiveness the other alpha was exuding. He felt sure that him and Jensen wasn’t an item…were they?

“If Jensen wants to keep his newfound rep, he’s be able to beat us handicapped,” Chad smirked. Jared pouted, only half-jokingly.

“Right here, guys;” he raised his arm halfway. “Within full hearing range.”

“I don’t mind,” Jensen’s smooth voice spoke before either alpha could respond. Jared perked up hopefully; Jensen had been avoiding him the whole night, so maybe this was a peace offering, or something. Sending a huge smile to Jensen, he was concerned when the smile he received in response seemed a little scared, a little wary, and a lot more than a little sad.

Jared needed to get Jensen to himself as soon as possible.

Jared tried to break, and failed miserably, the cue slipping in his clumsy grasp and not even touching the white ball.

“Let’s try that again, Jay-Man,” Chad rolled his eyes, and Jared fought the urge to flick his nose. Before Jared could act on his impulse, a warm and solid presence was at his side. Jensen.

“Ignore Chad,” he said steadily, lowly. “Focus on the target.” He adjusted the cue in Jared’s hands, not once touching him, but nonetheless sparking something in Jared. “Hold the cue lightly at the top, let it slide smoothly in the V between your thumb and index finger. Let your right hand do all the work. Once you feel the motion of the cue is smooth enough, angle your cue to where you want to hit.” Jared followed the soft timbre of his instructions, all while trying to regulate his breathing. Looking up, he noticed Jensen’s green eyes tracking the length of the cue thoughtfully, and he shifted almost self-consciously. “Very good,” Jensen praised, and Jared grinned. “Now just lean down, it will help you get a feel of what you’re aiming at, and snap your right arm forward in a smooth jerk.” Jared followed the instruction and his face nearly split with the force of his grin when the triangle of balls scattered across the table. None fell in, like it did with Jensen, but it was the first time Jared broke and the balls actually moved from their position, so he could totally count that one as a win.

Under Jensen’s firm, quiet, patient tutelage, the pair beat Chad and Tom. His mate was a great teacher; he never mocked or got exasperated, but he offered praise without a second thought if he thought it was deserved. His voice was quiet and low, so as not to make Jared feel like he was under a spotlight, and his words were sure and calming.

Their partnership- and damn if Jared didn’t revel in the word- worked well, and they went unbeaten for the rest of the night. When Jensen paired up with Chris for a final game against Chad and a significantly less hopeless Jared, it came as no surprise that Jensen and Chris won.

“I can’t win without my partner,” Jared shrugged softly, catching Jensen’s eye and trying to convey the weight in his words with his eyes. “I can’t win without Jensen.”

Jensen blushed, coming back into his self-awareness and shyness almost immediately.

When Jared saw Jensen about to get into Chris’ truck, it could have had a lot to do with his possessiveness when he shouted out,

“Jensen! Why don’t I give you a ride home? We’ll consider it payment for the pool lessons back
there.” He sent Jensen his best smile. The boy hesitated a second, before nodding, exchanging a look with Kane and then heading with Jared back to the pick-up.

This time, Jared was determined. By the end of the ride, he would get Jensen to agree to a date with him, one-on-one.

“Jared,” Jensen’s quiet voice stopped him before he could turn on the charm.

“Yeah?”

“We need to talk.”

Aw, fuck. Famous last words.

###
The Talk

Chapter Notes

Again, thanks so much for all the comments! You guys are fantastic. This was a difficult chapter to get out...I hope y'all like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

Jared tried not to let his foreboding show as he shifted the truck into reverse. He quickly found out that he was unsuccessful when Jensen sent him the smallest of smiles. It relaxed him some, but what worried him was the fact that the smile didn’t reach Jensen’s eyes.

“It’s okay, don’t be nervous,” Jensen said quietly. “I get why you did it, it’s understandable.”

Jared’s brow creased in confusion. “Why I did what?” he asked curiously.

“Kissed me.”

Jared’s face split into a grin. “You get why I kissed you?” he repeated, chuckling slightly. “Well, I would hope you did, I’d hate to think anybody else kisses you randomly, for different reasons.” Jared would have bristled at the very thought, had he not been totally distracted by the wince that was barely noticeable pass through Jensen.

“Yeah,” Jensen replied hollowly, his vice slightly thick. “That would pretty much be the only reason.” Jared’s heart ached at the pain lacing his mate’s voice and he wondered at which point in the conversation he had shoved his foot all the way up his mouth. “In any event,” Jensen continued before Jared could ask, “I just wanted to tell you that you needn’t bother keeping the charade going, I’ll be sure to keep our grade strong regardless, you don’t need to do all…this.”

Jared was fairly certain he’d never gotten so badly lost in a conversation, so quickly, before in his life.

He found himself at a loss for words, and as he glanced at Jensen, he saw the smaller boy slouched slightly, seeming deflated from the high he was riding after the pool games. This, more than anything, pulled Jared from his funk, and he quickly pulled over. Jensen straightened in alarm, fear flooding those stunning emerald eyes, and the sight punched Jared like a fist to the gut. He never wanted for that look to be on Jensen’s face, ever.

“Jensen…” he breathed, reaching out to cup the boy’s cheek, needing suddenly to feel the reassuring softness of his skin under his palm.

When Jensen flinched, Jared felt like he was the one who’d been struck.

“I’m sorry,” Jensen muttered almost instantly, forcing his body into a relaxed position. Jared’s hand was still suspended, frozen mid-action in his shock and almost incapacitating rage. Tentatively, his mate raised a hand and pressing two gentle fingers on to his wrist, guided his hand back down, bringing Jared back to the present.
“I would _never_ hurt you, Jen,” Jared choked out in a hushed murmur, the words springing to his mouth before he could really even think about it. Jensen smiled at him, a forced, tired shadow of the bright grin that Jared only saw a handful of times himself. He missed that 1000-watt smile like a physical ache, only now realizing just how much it could brighten his entire world, turn it from black-and-white to full-on fucking _Technicolor_. His finger rose unbidden to trace a light, lazy pattern just below Jensen’s right eye, thinking fleetingly how his smile didn’t reach those expressive green whirlpools of emotion. Jared felt admittedly elated when Jensen didn’t flinch at the contact this time; instead, he closed his eyes and ever-so-slightly leaned his head into it. Jared mentally commended himself on his seeing through the Herculean effort not to kiss those plush, sexy lips. Moving his finger further down, joining up the dots of freckles that looked far too adorable on his mate’s face, Jared repeated, “I would _never_, _ever_ hurt you. I would sooner chew off my own hand than to lay a single finger on you. You know that, right? _Please_ know that, Jen. Please _believe_ me.”

Startled, wide green eyes snapped up to meet Jared’s hazel. Jared felt exposed, as though those sharp, stunning orbs could see straight through him, penetrate all the outer walls and look directly at Jared’s soul. He thought he should feel uncomfortable, laid bare for this complex and mysterious human to analyze, but instead, he felt nothing short of a pure and utter _rightness_. Jensen’s eyes on him were not calculating or judgmental; it was like a warm caress of love and acceptance. He felt amazed that anyone could give him such a sense of _home_.

The next words passed through those sinful lips, squeezed Jared’s heart in a vice grip of sheer satisfaction and overwhelming relief.

“I believe you.”

Unable to stifle his urge any longer, Jared leaned down and caught Jensen’s lip in a light kiss. Or, at least, it was _supposed_ to be a light kiss.

But then Jensen had to go and sigh, that tiny little breathy moan that set Jared’s entire body on fire. He wanted _more_ of those sounds.

With a half-strangled moan himself, Jared forced himself to be patient. Cradling Jensen’s face in both hands without breaking the kiss, Jared flicked his tongue over Jensen’s bottom lip, asking permission. Jensen gasped at the sensation, and Jared was nothing if not an opportunist. Licking quickly into Jensen’s mouth, he swallowed the boy’s subsequent moan, only to contribute with a loud groan as the tastes permeated his senses.

Mapping every ridge, Jared chased away the lingering taste of Coke and pizza, until he finally tasted the unique, sweet taste of Jensen. Jared finally understood the cliché behind saying someone tasted like summer rain and candy floss. Kneading the boy’s jaw, Jared caught his bottom lip between his teeth and nipped lightly, before sucking it hard. Jensen strangled another gasp, his hands flying up belatedly to tangle in Jared’s hair. Jared gasped as the contact sent a fresh wave of desire crashing through him.

“Jared,” Jensen moaned breathlessly, and the sound nearly had Jared coming right there. Gripping Jensen’s hips, he lifted the boy in one motion, not as smooth as he would have liked, given their enclosed space, but landing him on his lap anyway. Jensen shifted to straddle him, his back resting on the steering as he ground down, forcing a choked, guttural moan from Jared’s lips as their hard cocks pressed against each other through two, rough layers of denim.

“Jensen,” Jared growled, sucking hard at the sensitive skin of the boy’s throat. “Say it _again_…say my name again…” he bit down on the skin and Jensen let out a strangled scream.
“Jared!” he mewled, rocking his hips mindlessly into Jared. For his part, the alpha in him was immensely enjoying the friction and the sense of possessiveness, but even as he felt starved for the taste and feel of Jensen, he knew that they needed to talk first. He couldn’t let Jensen think that this thing between them as anything short of real, of fate, of destiny.

Nothing short of love.

Because yes, Jared may not have known much about the writhing, green-eyed beauty in his lip. He may only have known that Jensen was his mate, was the best damn pool player he’d ever met and that he liked Chemistry, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was the fact that Jared loved him. Against all odds and defying all logical reason, Jared was in love with him.

“Jen, stop,” he breathed. “We need…we need to talk.” When he tensed, Jared felt an icy cold seep into him at the thought of losing Jensen now. Gripping him firmly, one hand on his hip and the other wrapped around his waist, Jared nuzzled lightly just under Jensen’s jaw. The boy relaxed, and effectually, Jared did too, sighing happily when Jensen leaned his head and placed the softest of kisses on Jared’s mop of brown hair, so soft that Jared would have thought he’d imagined it if not for the sound.


Jared ordered his thoughts quickly. “What were you talking about earlier?” he asked curiously. “About our Chem grade?”

“I was telling you that you didn’t need to do this,” Jensen gestured between them, “you didn’t need to pretend to want this, just so that you’ll get a good Chemistry grade. I can help you get a good grade, you don’t have to…”

“Jensen,” Jared interrupted incredulously, “do you honestly believe that…that I…” Jared could scarcely get the words out. Determinedly, he rolled his hips, pressing his still hard erection over Jensen’s thigh, eliciting a moan of pleasure from the other boy. “Does it feel like I don’t want you?” he asked in a low growl. “Would I be this painfully hard for you if I only wanted you to get my grade up?”

“W-why…” Jensen hitched in a quick breath. “Why do I feel like…like the answer to that is…is a no?”

Jared laughed lowly. “Because you’re a fucking smart guy.” He bucked his hips upwards again, several times in quick succession, reveling in the keening sounds it pulled from Jensen’s throat. “Because you’re my fucking smart guy,” he added, voice deepening as he acknowledged his possessiveness.

“Jared,” Jensen gasped tightly, “you gotta stop moving if you want us to talk, man.”

“Right,” Jared chuckled breathlessly again. He tried hard to regain his train of thought, and when he did, he couldn’t help his eyes narrowing. “Jen, what did you mean when you said yesterday that you tend to bring out the worst in people? When I was apologizing for scaring off your trench coat friend?”

“Because I do,” Jensen shrugged. “It was my fault you got mad and we fought, and I was rude to you, even though I was the one at fault.”

Jared felt his heart hurt in his chest as his mate spoke so calmly and frankly. Tightening his wrap
around Jensen’s waist, Jared peppered gentle kisses over his face until the melodious, heavenly sound of the boy’s light, but genuine laughter filled the car.

“Jen,” he breathed, locking eyes with Jensen, “that was not your fault. It was all on me. I was acting like a complete jackass. That had nothing to do with you, and you were right to be rude to me, on account of the previous jackass-ery we just spoke of.” Jensen huffed another small laugh, and it felt more like a victory than any of Jared’s football games. “Jen,” he continued, serious now, “you make me want to be a better person. I don’t know why,” he lied, “but even though we just met a week ago, when I’m around you, I want to be as good as I can be. You do nothing but bring out the absolute best in me. It’s only been a week and I can say that with 100 percent certainty.”

Soft green eyes peered at him from under ridiculously long lashes, and when Jensen nodded tentatively, not looking convinced at all, Jared made it his mission right then to make Jensen believe every word he was saying.

“Anything else you want to talk about?” Jensen asked, cocking his head to the side in a gesture that was too fucking adorable for words. Jared forced himself to think rationally.

“Just one,” he said seriously, and Jensen bit his bottom lip, ripping a shudder of desire from Jared at the absolutely sexy sight it provided.

“What?”

“Jen?” Jared cleared his throat, nervousness bubbling up in him, despite their position and their obvious chemistry. “Will you go out on a date with me?”

The blinding smile Jared received was worth all the apprehension and the week agonizing over it.

“I would really like that, Jared,” Jensen accepted shyly.

“Yeah?” Jared couldn’t stop himself as he grinned widely.

“Yeah,” Jensen laughed. “But I think I should maybe get off your lap for now,” he grinned mischievously.

“I don’t know,” Jared leered playfully at the gorgeous boy. “I really like this position.” He let his hand dip a moment from Jensen’s hip, to brush over the top of his ass. Their deep, needy moans amalgamated into a carnal sound of pleasure that did nothing for either of their raging hard-ons.

“Fucking tease,” Jensen blurted breathily, and Jared nipped at his throat, licking over the mark he’d sucked into the skin earlier.

“Oh, I’ll deliver soon enough,” Jared promised darkly, in a low rumble. Jensen laughed, flopping back into his seat. Jared instantly missed the soft heat of the other boy’s body.

“I have no doubt.”

Jared flashed him a wolfish grin and started the truck again, pulling on to the road before reaching over and taking Jensen’s hand in his own. Every few minutes, he picked up the hand in his to press a light kiss to different knuckles, the inside of his wrist, his palm…the relaxed smile lighting up Jensen’s eyes and face was almost addictive. So caught up was he in his love-struck happiness, he didn’t even think to wonder why Jensen asked to be dropped off at school instead of giving him his home address.

When they pulled up in front of the school, Jared dragged him in for another toe-curling kiss, licking
deep and sucking hard; Jared honestly thought that if anyone could make Taste Of Jensen into an ice-cream, they’d be into a multi-million dollar goldmine right there. When they finally broke apart, Jensen grinned, bit his lip again, unconsciously, and started out of the door.

Suddenly, something tugged at his mind and Jared flashed back to the start of the conversation, where he’d thought he’d monumentally screwed up. “Oh, and Jen?” Jared smiled as Jensen turned to face him, the barest hint of a smile playing on his beautiful features. “Just for the record? I kissed you because I fucking wanted you, and when I said that nobody else should, for any reason, I meant that I’d have to kill anyone who kissed you, on the principals of a terribly possessive and jealous boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” Jensen asked, an adorable blush coloring his cherubic cheeks.

“Yeah.” Jared bit his lip suddenly, unsure of whether Jensen was fine with that. “Are you…”

“I like it,” Jensen reassured him quickly, grinning shyly. “I can get on board with that.”

Jared laughed exuberantly, feeling lighter and happier than he could ever remember feeling. “Me too, Jen. Me too.”

~*Jensen*~

For all his bitching and moaning about couples and their over exaggerated happiness, Jensen now had to consider that maybe it wasn’t all over exaggerated, because he was still seriously wondering whether he’d been roofied, with the way he felt like he was on cloud 9.

The weekend could safely be considered perfect. Eric came home late Sunday night, too tired for much except a half-hearted slap to the back of his head and a few barbed comments that, although cruel, couldn’t dampen his mood. His best friend had come to visit, and for all his concern, it was as if nothing had changed between them. He had his first kiss which, on the hotness scale of 1 to 10, registered a whopping and well-deserved 14, and several subsequent, equally hot kisses thereafter. He had almost- almost- fit in with everyone, especially after displaying his pool skills.

Most of all, for whatever odd reason, the hottest and most awesome guy in the whole school (possibly in the whole world, but Jensen still needed a little more data to conclusively prove that one) asked him out. Wanted to go on a date with him. With him. It was a dream come true, and even as Jensen forced himself to be ready for the other shoe to drop, he made himself also enjoy it while it lasted, before Jared found out how damaged and not worth it he was and left. Because the memories? Jensen knew without question that it would get him through years of sorrow; when his life turned dark and cold, as he knew it would, he could pull forth the memories of the most amazing, most beautiful hazel-eyed, floppy-haired boy who could turn his veins to liquid fire with a look, a touch, a caress of their lips. He could wrap the memories of Jared&Jensen around him, like a trusty warm quilt in the storm of his life, a shelter, a haven to get him through the torrid weather. He would always know that this perfect slice of heaven had been his once upon a lifetime ago, and that would get him through anything.

###

Walking into school the next morning, Jensen was surprised when he heard several voices shouting across the grounds to him. He lifted his head to be greeted by the smiling faces of Misha, Genevieve, Chad and Jared. Jensen grinned and before he could think on how out-of-character he was being, he waved at them.
“Come and chill with us, Jense,” Genevieve beckoned him, smiling broadly.

Jensen hesitated; he had met Chris at their lockers every morning last week, and although it was the furthest from a thing of theirs, even though it was likely just coincidence, Jensen felt oddly like he would be letting the other boy down or hurting him if he didn’t.

“Later,” Jensen called back, laughing at Misha’s dramatic groan. “I’m gonna go meet Chris at our lockers first.”

Not wanting to wait for an answer, Jensen waved at them one more time and jogged toward the doors. He wasn’t surprised to see that Chris was already there, leaning against the lockers and waiting for him, presumably.

“Yo Freckles,” he called out warmly when he caught sight of Jensen. Shaking his head with a sigh, he resigned himself to the nickname and smiled back. “You’re late!”

“Jared and Friends wants to hang out,” Jensen explained. “You game, or do you wanna moon after Sofia, or something else completely?”

“Shut up, I do not moon,” Chris shot back, his hand shooting out and catching Jensen lightly across the chest.

“Sure,” Jensen rolled his eyes with a teasing grin as he twisted out his locker combination. As he hoisted his backpack up, Chris’ fist shot out absentely to crash into that spot on his locker that Jensen could never seem to pinpoint. “Thanks,” he muttered as he packed in his books for the first period.

“Yeah,” Chris waved his hand dismissively. “How do you know they want to hang out?”

“They asked me when I came into school,” Jensen explained distractedly.

“You didn’t go to them straight?” Chris asked quietly. Had he not been busy sorting his books out, Jensen may have noticed the intense look on his best friend’s face.

“I went to them, told them we’d come later.” He shrugged.

“Why later?” Chris pushed.

“Because I was coming to meet you here,” Jensen answered patiently, closing his locker. “And I didn’t know if you’d be game for it.”

Chris fixed Jensen with a look he didn’t quite understand before throwing a casual arm around him and steering him to the doors. “Let’s hang with your boyfriend and co. I can shoot seductive winks and masculine poses at Sofia tomorrow.” Jensen grinned.

“You Stud, you.”

~*Jared*~

Why?

Why, why, why, why, why, why, **why??**

Why were Chris and Jensen so God damned close? How had Chris managed it? Did he have competition? Was Jensen interested in Chris?
The thoughts were driving him crazy, and he didn’t even notice it when Tom, Sandy and Danneel joined their group. He did, however, notice it when Jensen and fucking Chris joined them.

Damn it, what was wrong with him? He liked Chris this time last week.

As soon as the question entered his mind, he knew the answer, bringing to mind the words stored deep in his memory bank.

_Beware, my Lord, of jealousy. ‘Tis the green-eyed monster that doth mock the meat it feeds on._

Ok, so maybe it was weird to be quoting Shakespeare, but then, Jared was an alpha werewolf, in love with a human boy he’d known for a week (an awesome week, Jared thought that was worth noting), juggling pack problems with football games, Calculus and now, jealously and the start of a new relationship. Fuck if he wasn’t entitled to a little weird.

Finishing his little internal monologue with a satisfied nod, Jared determined that the only possible port of call would be to talk to Chris. Then Jensen. Maybe Genevieve. Not Chad. Never Chad.

As Misha threw an arm around Jensen, Jared made a mental note to talk to him too. Maybe establish a strictly-no-touching rule.

But he had an order to follow now. “Yo Chris,” he called out. “Come to the truck with me, I need to return your CD.”

The bastard smirked knowingly at him. “Sure thing, Jay-Man,” he nodded, shooting Jensen a reassuring smile before resuming his cocky smirk. As soon as they were a few steps away, he grinned. “So, you wanna talk about Jensen? Better get started, Lover Boy.”

“Are you interested in him?” Jared asked, cutting to the chase.

“No,” he answered steadily, and Jared breathed a sigh of relief when he detected no deception. “I’m straight, man. Jensen’s a fine-ass man, but I don’t think of him like that.”

“Does he think of you like that?” Jared frowned at the thought.

“He’s crazy about you, man,” Chris rolled his eyes.

“Then why are you two so close?” he asked in frustration. “How did you do what I’ve been trying to do for a week, in the space of an hour?”

“Trusting and being close to your best friend is different than trusting and being close to your boyfriend,” Chris said easily. “I get the feeling he’s been hurt before, and if he’s going to trust you even more than he trusts me, he’s gonna need time to get to that point.”

“Fair enough,” Jared allowed with a pout. He hesitated before ploughing forward with the question that had been on his mind since that first Chemistry lesson. “Chris? How did you become his friend so easily? Let him in so easily?”

“He called me on my crap,” Chris laughed affectionately. “I mean, everyone meets me and is automatically scared of me, and then this guy comes out of nowhere and calls me on staring at him. It was fucking hilarious man,” he chuckled. “Jensen has guts, and backbone. Then after that, he kind of became the little brother I never had. I’d always wondered when I was younger what it would have been like if…” Chris swallowed convulsively, and Jared nodded in sympathy; everyone in the pack knew Chris’ story. “In any case,” he cleared his throat and continued, “Jensen is like that to me. He’s my little brother. I don’t need to know much to know that. I mean, look at what happened this
morning! We never planned to meet anywhere, ever, he could easily have hung out with you guys, but he came to the lockers, to meet me first and include me in his plans. Jensen is one of the most steadfastly loyal guys I’ve ever met, and to have that loyalty shown to me without any hesitation…” Chris fixed piercing blue eyes on Jared. “I’m never going to take that trust and respect and allegiance lightly. I’m going to prove to him I deserve it.”

Jared nodded in understanding, feeling like an ass for doubting Chris and his intentions. But at least now, he had a different idea…

“One more question Kane,” he grinned. “Will you please help me find ways to woo Jensen?”

It took several bribes and more pleading than an alpha of his stature would care to admit, but he had Chris on board. And they had a kickass plan.

The J.A.W (Jensen Ackles Wooing) Initiative would commence shortly.

Jen wasn’t going to know what hit him.

###

Chapter End Notes

Anyone else curious about Chris’ backstory? His little secret will soon come to light...I hope this chapter wrapped up all the niggly details I've been skipping out on! Any suggestions on what y'all want to see with the J.A.W Initiative?! JayGirl
First of all, I'm so sorry for the lack of updates! I had a small accident involving a fire and some second degree burns, but I'm back to firing on all cylinders now!

Secondly, thank you SO MUCH to all my loyal readers who have been checking in on me and pushing me to update! I appreciate all the concern so much! Special thanks to j_2_is_life and cherry pie! This is my New Year's present to y'all!

To all my readers, a very happy new year! May the year ahead be as epic as our favorite couple! ;-)
Jensen snorted. “Do I look like someone who’s an expert on wooing girls?”

“Better you than Chad,” Chris shrugged, and Jensen sobered at the thought.

“When you put it that way…” Jensen bit his lip in thought. “Seriously, though, man, I know nothing about Sofía.”

“You don’t need to know,” Chris urged. “Give me some standard tried and tested stuff. What would woo you?”

“That would be your first mistake, dude,” Jensen shrugged. “Wooing someone, although I’m no expert, should be personal, not some random tried and tested, predictable cliché.”

“So you would be wooed by personal gestures?” Chris asked doubtfully.

“Yeah, I guess,” Jensen nodded. “Find personal and unique ways to do normal things.”

“Normal things being?”

“Yeesh, Chris,” he grumbled, “you’d think that you’ve never had to woo a girl before.”

“I never did,” he frowned. “They usually come to me.”

A surprised huff of laughter bubbled through Jensen. “This is going to be fun,” he chuckled. “Okay, first step is public acknowledgment. Everyone, guy or girl, likes to be acknowledged in public as someone that you’re interested in. It’ll help the jealousy factor and it’d go a long way towards convincing them that you’re serious.”

“Public acknowledgement, gotcha,” Chris nodded gamely. “What’s next, Mr Miyagi?”

Jensen snorted. “Well, Christian-San, I guess you gotta think of cute, personal ways to make her feel special,” he shrugged, thinking about what would make a person feel swept off their feet. “Little, cute gestures that show her you’re thinking of her and that you know the little stuff about her. Sometimes, it’s knowing the little things that make the biggest difference.”

“Cute and personal gestures, I hear you.” Nodding and making a large tick in the air with his index finger, Chris indicated that Jensen should continue.

“I think knowing her friends would be important,” he offered. “Don’t only interact with her, she’ll appreciate it if you bother to be friends with her friends too.”

“Play nice with her friends.” Chris looked a little disgruntled at that, and Jensen didn’t bother hiding his grin, while wondering idly whether Chris was really making an internal list.

“And I guess an epic first date would be the clincher,” he concluded decisively, far more invested into this plan that he thought he would be. “You gotta think of something super special and personal, something that you think will take her breath away. Semi-private, because you don’t want her to freak out, but you want to show her you don’t want to share her either. You’ll want to show her a more personal side to you, too, because she’ll want to see that you feel comfortable enough around her to be the person you hide from everyone else, and that way, she’ll feel comfortable enough to reciprocate. And more than anything, you have to do something that shows her that you were paying attention all those times you’ve spoken to her, stored each detail to memory, because it was her. Because you’ve always listened to her, because you felt what she said was important, even if it might seem small and insignificant to anyone else.”
Chris was silent for a moment after Jensen stopped speaking, and Jensen worried he’d said something wrong when his friend simply looked at him for a solid, quiet minute. Before he could say anything, Chris finally spoke.

“Fuck, Jen, I think I just fell in love with you,” he said, laying his hand over his heart, only the mirth dancing in his eyes indicating his teasing.

Jensen burst out laughing. “Fuck you, man,” he shook his head, running a hand through his hair.

“No, man, that was fucking beautiful,” he protested around a smothered chuckle, mimicking Jensen as he took out his books. “Jesus, I’m glad you’re gay, dude.”

###

*I saw a bird’s nest today, on my way home, and I thought of you.*

Jensen stared at the text on his ancient phone, biting his lip. He had bought the phone for himself, so he was proud of it despite it being out-of-date, and he and Jared had exchanged numbers after school. It had been, by far, the best Monday in the history of Mondays, but now, Jensen was slumped in confusion.

It didn’t *sound* like a pick-up line. But then again, what did Jensen know about flirting? Adam had basically laid his claim, and Jensen had happily gone along, there hadn’t been much in the way of building up to a relationship. Which was a large part of the fact that Jensen’s heart was valiantly trying to jump out of his chest at the message Jared had sent him. How did you reply to something that obscure? And was it a good or bad thing that he thought of him when he saw a bird’s nest? Did it mean Jared thought he was a safe choice or something? And was it a good or bad thing if he was a safe choice? Or did it mean that he thought Jensen had to leave the nest and stop being such a baby?

Jensen briefly entertained the thought of smashing his phone in a frenzied panic, but he figured that idea might have some psychotic tendencies submerged in it.

Sighing, he eventually steeled his nerves and replied:

*How did a bird’s nest make you think of me?*

Almost immediately, Jensen wanted to take it back.

What if it was something he was supposed to understand right away? What if it was a joke that Jensen didn’t get, and now Jared would think he was a total idiot?

So caught up in his new strain of stressing, Jensen nearly missed it when his phone beeped with another text.

*It didn’t. I saw it, and then I thought of you, because I think of you all of the time :-(*

Jensen giggled- *fucking giggled!*- becoming giddy with relief that he hadn’t already messed up his sliver of a chance with Jared. Before he knew what was happening, his fingers were flying across the keyboard of their own accord.

*How long did it take you to think of that one? ;-)*

He didn’t even have time to be horrified at how nasty it could have sounded without the teasing inflection of his voice as a buffer, before Jared replied.
Jensen laughed again, feeling light and happy for the first time in forever as he started dinner. Putting the roast in the oven and setting the sauce to a low boil, he leaned against the counter to reply, not wanting to leave the food unattended lest he burn the house down.

*I don’t know. Pick-up lines are all about the delivery.*

Setting his phone on the counter, Jensen stirred the pot of sauce and put the roasted veggies in the microwave. Eric would be home in about an hour and if Jensen wanted to avoid a bad beating that Jared and Chris would most certainly catch on to, he had to have dinner ready. The house was already clean, and all his work, complete, and Jensen hoped to hell that would suffice tonight.

*Maybe you’ve gotta demonstrate this delivery you think allows pick-up lines to work?*

Jensen flushed as he read Jared’s reply. With a smile playing on his lips, he decided not to think too hard on his replies, because really, how many times can you freak yourself out before giving yourself an aneurism? Jensen definitely didn’t want to be the one to find out.

*Maybe sometime ;-)*

Taking the roast out of the oven and pouring the sauce into a bowl, Jensen was surprised when his phone chirped again. Pleasure bubbled inside him; did Jared really want to talk to him?

*Did you know that adding nitric acid to a potassium hydroxide solution would have no reaction? … Also, what’s your favorite color?*

Jensen snorted. Jared was either as bad at Chemistry as he claimed to be, or he was as smooth an operator as everyone else claimed him to be.

*That’s a lie. The acid will react to the base in a neutralization reaction to produce a salt and water. And my favorite color is silver. What’s yours?*

Jared’s reply came almost immediately, and setting the food in the warming oven, Jensen barricaded himself in his room and settled down in preparation of maybe actually having a conversation with the single most awesome guy in the world.

*I know! But I figured you would have to correct me, and then in turn, you would have to tell me your favorite color, and social obligation calls for you to ask me mine, and hey presto! We’re in a conversation that you’re obligated to see through till the early hours of the morning ;-)*

A laugh bubbled up in Jensen. So... definitely smooth then.

###

Something was up.

Jensen didn’t know what, he didn’t know when it would happen, hell, he didn’t even know who was involved, but *something was up.*

Walking into school Thursday morning, it felt as though there was a light buzz in the air, one that he was reacting to in kind. The corner of his lips tugged upwards in a half smile as he saw Chris with Jared and the gang; it would seem that his friend was learning to be sociable after all. As he walked towards them, Jared was the first to look up. Jensen was hopelessly far away from them, but he liked
to think that Jared sensed him coming, that Jared just knew the moment he was in the same vicinity, rather than to face the reality that Jared had probably just turned around by fluke. Whatever reasons were in Jensen’s mind soon fled as Jared aimed that broad grin at him, and Jensen could see those dimples flashing even from a distance. When he had closed the distance between them, Jared called out, not overly loud, just loud enough for his voice to carry the short distance.

“Hey Jen.” Coming forward a few steps to meet him halfway, Jared surprised Jensen by snagging him around the waist and pulling him into a quick hug, landing a firm kiss to his temple. Jensen flushed a most spectacular shade of red as the girls squealed in excitement.

“Finally!” Genevieve squealed, clapping her hands together in childish excitement. “It took Jared long enough!”

“It took me all of one week!” Jared protested, pulling an immobile Jensen firmly into his side, arm looping around his waist and his thumb curling into Jensen’s belt loop.

“Exactly,” Danneel rolled her eyes. “That’s 6 days too long.”

“I disagree,” Misha called out, pouting playfully. “Jared worked too fast. Hey Jense, if you ever get tired of the giant, I’m very available to be a far more pleasing substitute.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively, stunning a laugh out of Jensen and a growl out of Jared.

“Sorry, Meesh,” Jensen grinned, quick to stop a retort from Jared. “I’m neither mentally unstable, nor am I straight, and I would have to be either to ever tire of Jared.” Aiming a shy smile at him, Jensen was pleased to see Jared’s broad grin. Jared leaned down to press a swift kiss to the soft spot just under Jensen’s ear, chuckling against his skin when Jensen flushed again.

“Gah!” Chad brought his hands up to fist at his face. “My eyes! They burn!!”

Jensen thought he was entitled to laugh as Jared tackled Chad, putting him quickly in a headlock. He tried to ignore the daggers Sandy was sending his way, but it was difficult to do when she wasn’t even bothering to hide it. Likely seeing the same thing, Chris positioned himself next to Jensen, leaning casually against his shoulder. Shooting him a grateful look, Jensen relaxed, oddly at ease thanks to Chris and his protectiveness.

Maybe they weren’t the only ones who sensed the tension in the air, because Tom suddenly piped up.

“As much as I love seeing Chad getting his ass handed to him, maybe we should leave this for when we’re shitfaced…” he broke off abruptly, eyes widening as he clamped his mouth shut with an audible clack of his teeth, looking like a kid caught in a lie by his mom. Everyone around him tensed almost imperceptibly, even Chris, and Jensen was awash with the feeling that he was the only one on the outside of a very important circle.

“If we’re shitfaced when it happens, how will Jen remember it?” Jared blurted, breaking the silence that seemed to last a lifetime, but probably only lasted a few seconds. Half-hearted laughs arose and an undignified noise from Tom that seemed to count as agreement, but it was Jared’s eyes that told Jensen a truth. They were still bright with fresh panic and the way they stayed on him made him believe that his reaction to their little cover-up was important to Jared.

And suddenly, Jensen felt like the punchline to a bad joke.

Panic began to build in his chest, and a bitter taste hit the back of his throat. Silence reigned over them and Chris and Jared, the only two people Jensen wanted to turn to for comfort, were somehow
in on the joke. Before it could escalate, Jensen felt a familiar weight press into the space between his shoulder blades, and he turned his head to meet the clear, steady, blue-eyed gaze of his best friend.

Jensen knew without a doubt that he trusted Chris. Unbidden, flashes of the boy protecting him and having his back without asking anything in return came to mind.

Jensen tore his gaze away from Chris and landed on the wide eyes of his maybe-kind-of-sorta boyfriend. In those deep hazel depths, he saw a blaze of hope, and an intense something that Jensen couldn’t put a name to, having never seen it before. In the instant that their eyes connected, a strange, almost out-of-body peace came over Jensen. The fear squeezing his heart in a vice grip vanished, replaced instead by the memory of Jared’s concern, his smile, his warmth, his affection. The phantom touch of his lips against Jensen’s skin burned, an ethereal reminder of the fact that Jensen trusted Jared, felt something for him stronger than was healthy, stronger than he ever thought he could have felt in such a short space of time. What they had between them was something that defied all of Jensen’s logic and broke every wall and barrier he ever set up to protect himself. He could hardly remember his life without Jared, now, and if he could trust in them enough to push away all of his doubts and fears and give them a try, couldn’t he trust in Jared enough to know that he was probably overthinking this? That there probably wasn’t a secret, that Jensen was just paranoid?

The tension melted from his body. Jared was different. Jared wasn’t like all the others. He would never keep a secret and hurt him like that.

Right?

~*Jared*~

Jared watched as Jensen’s shoulders released their tense set, and on cue, everyone else relaxed too. The relief was like a ton of iced water in the middle of the Sahara, and needing the solid and reassuring presence of his mate next to him, Jared moved to take Jensen into his arms. He could feel the amount of trust in Jensen’s response weighing on him like an anvil; Jared just hoped that he was protecting Jensen as much as he thought he was, and not just digging a deeper hole.

Now, though, he had to focus on the J.A.W. Initiative. Speaking to Jen the past few days were nothing short of amazing and not for the first time, Jared wished there were more hours in the day so that he could spend it with Jensen.

###

“I’ll get you a car, a house in the Hamptons, a lifetime supply of MNMs, and I’ll give you my kidney if you ever need it.”

Jensen’s laughter lit up Jared’s soul; he was shaking so hard from it that he was doubled over, tears of laughter streaming from his eyes as he fought for breath. Jared grinned, his face heating up a little when Beaver rolled his eyes at them. Chemistry was the only period they sat together, aside from homeroom, because Jen was intent on passing his classes (much to Jared’s hormone’s dismay), and because Jen insisted that they could spend time together out of class because he wouldn’t compromise the time he spent with Chris. Not for the first time, Jared was jealous of the blue-eyed alpha, but at least now he knew he had nothing romantic to worry about.

They had been compromising back and forth for the last hour, Jared’s offers getting steadily more ridiculous, resulting in Jensen’s sweet, yet uncontrollable laughter.
“You’re gonna buy me a car, a house in the Hamptons, and a lifetime supply of MNMs, and give me your kidney if I agree to hang out with you after football today?” Jensen repeated, managing to get the words out through stints of laughter.

“That sounds about right,” Jared nodded, grinning at the stunning boy in front of him. Jensen didn’t seem to know it, but he positively glowed when he just let himself go. His laugh was already Jared’s favorite sound in the whole world; Jen threw his whole body into his laugh, and the sound was something Jared already had committed to memory.

“If you throw in a blue balloon, I’m in,” Jensen said mock seriously, barely hiding his broad smile.

“You got yourself a deal!” Jared grabbed his hand and shook it, pumping hard and smiling his widest, most charming smile.

“You’re insane,” Jen laughed fondly, turning his attention back to their work.

“Insane is such a harsh term for it,” he smiled serenely. Gently plucking the vial with purple liquid from Jensen’s hand, he set it down and turned to him with a straight face. “Back to important matters now…” Jared laughed when Jensen punched him lightly in the arm, shaking his head in exasperation and reaching for the vial. “Our date!” Jared announced brightly, as loudly as he could without getting heard by Beaver and his super hearing. “Saturday, I’ll pick you up at 5?”

Blushing, Jen ducked his head and nodded, smiling at the smoking concoction on their desk.

“Sounds great, I’m looking forward to it.”

“But we have to get through the whole of tonight, and Friday, and Saturday morning and afternoon before it comes,” Jared pouted, only half-jokingly.

“Well we’re hanging out after school, so technically only Friday and Saturday,” Jen offered, smiling indulgently at him and absently reaching out to push the stubborn lock of hair hanging on Jared’s forehead back behind his ear. Jared almost purred at the touch, welcoming the electricity that bubbled under his skin at the touch of his mate’s hand; a touch and electricity once so foreign that was now as natural as breathing.

Smiling dopey, Jared only nodded, grabbing the vial and throwing its contents into their experiment tube. Jensen made a sound of warning, and before Jared knew it, the entire mixture began bubbling upwards, hissing and smoking dangerously, turning orange and bubbling over the top.

“PADALECKI!” Beaver shouted.

Jared could only grin sheepishly as Jensen almost hit the floor with laughter.

###

Watching from the end of the hallway, Jared couldn’t stop grinning. His last period was free, while Jen had History, and he considered it a free well spent.

Jensen opened his locker with some help from Chris, and promptly burst out laughing. Jared watched, pleased, as Jen continued to laugh in delight as he pulled out a toy car, a little figurine of a mansion, a bean, and a packet of MNMs with a blue balloon tied floating to it, from his locker.

“God, Jared is fucking incredible.” Thanks to his superior hearing, Jared caught the murmured whisper, and warmth filled him from the inside out.

The J.A.W. Initiative was in progress.
Once again, I'm so sorry for my delay in posting! Here's a nice long chapter to make up for it!

Quick shout out to everyone who left comments and Kudos, and everyone reading this! Thank you so, so much for all your amazing support and encouragement. I am humbled and honored beyond compare that you all are enjoying this story! Your comments, suggestions and requests mean the world to me, so thank you! You guys are my inspiration!

Special shout out to Trell_des_roches; Chris' story!

I tried a new route, writing Chris' point of view, so I hope y'all enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

“Is not!”

“On what grounds are you arguing this?”

“On the grounds that I said so, so there!”

Jared punctuated his statement by sticking his tongue out and crossing his arms over his chest, feeling only mildly insulted when Jensen burst into laughter.

“Yeah, that’s definitely a strong argument,” he teased, looking more relaxed than Jared had ever seen him. Something inside him warmed at that, and he had to consciously remind himself that they were sprawled on cushions on his floor, in the middle of a spirited debate over whether Cool Runnings was a better movie than The Titanic.

“The Titanic is a classic,” Jared pointed out.

“It’s ridiculous,” Jensen snorted, getting up to throw his empty can of Coke into the wastepaper basket at the corner of Jared’s room. “What kind of a respectable captain misses a glaringly massive iceberg in the middle of his path? And I bet that plank was more than big enough to fit both of them, either Rose kicked him off, or Jack chose death over being stuck with her.”

Jared burst into laughter. “Cynical much?”
Jensen shrugged, leaning against the wall to face Jared, his face saddening a little. “I guess I’ve never much had reason not to be.”

Jared felt his heart crumple. Wanting nothing more than to make Jen smile again, Jared rose, and in the same quick motion, raced at Jensen and tackled him, pulling him on to the bed, being sure not to jostle him too much and incidentally hurt him. Jen was shocked into inaction, and belatedly began to laugh as Jared landed lightly next to him. Hoisting himself on his palms, Jared held his body over Jensen’s so that every inch of them was connected in a barely there touch. Normally sparkling emerald eyes turned a dark forest green as Jen reached up and lightly fisted his hands in the sides of Jared’s t-shirt, pulling down with the gentlest of pressure and effectively giving Jared permission to kiss him.

Jared moved slowly, not wanting to diminish or belittle the sheer amount of trust it took from Jen to allow him closer, given the history of hurt he had gone through that Chris had alluded to.

Stopping his lips mere breaths away from Jensen’s, Jared murmured, “I’m going to give you every reason in the world not to be a cynic.”

As their lips met, Jared reveled once more in the soft fullness and the sweet taste that was so unique to his stunning, perfect mate. Not nearly trusting his hormones in the big, comfortable bed as it was teamed with the alluring smell of his Jen, Jared kept the kiss light and teasing, a slow series of nips and licks and sucks, his touch running reverently over Jen’s lean body, all hard edges that should be uncomfortable, but instead fit perfectly against Jared’s body.

The missing puzzle piece of Jared’s existence in every way.

Before he could deepen the kiss as much as he wanted to, Jared pulled back, situating himself back next to his mate and running a hand through Jen’s hair before resting it lightly against his waist, his thumb rubbing circles into the soft jut of his hip. Jen turned and propped himself up on his elbow, facing Jared, and looking into soft green eyes, Jared’s heart warmed with the knowledge that this moment, this stitch in time, was just them together, untouched by the world and its ugliness. In this space- in their space- Jared wasn’t an alpha werewolf destined to be the leader of his pack, and Jensen wasn’t a boy touched by something that hurt him and made him untrusting. Jared wasn’t hiding a world away, and Jensen wasn’t hiding a world of secrets in those entrancing emerald orbs.

They were just two, love-struck teenagers, wrapped up in a bubble of happy togetherness, not hiding an ounce of themselves and not even feeling the need to.

And it felt amazing.

It was something Jared had never felt before in his entire life, not even with the pack-mates he grew up with. Never before had he felt so free to be himself, without the worry about being judged for thinking or feeling or acting a certain way. He felt as though he could bare his soul and not have to worry about what he would receive in return; because he felt certain it would be love and acceptance.

Jared took a moment to revel over the fact that a month ago, he would never have associated infatuation with himself, but now, he was in love.

The way the tides could change…

“Jay?” The nickname felt special as it came out of Jensen’s mouth.

“Yeah, Jen?” Jared murmured, not wanting to ruin the perfection of the moment by speaking too
The boy hesitated for a moment, before speaking. “There was this guy at my old school.” Jared sucked in an inaudible breath; Jen was opening up to him, for the first time. Voluntarily. He felt the importance of the moment impress itself heavily upon him, and he kept quiet, nodding encouragingly for Jensen to continue. “There’s some things I think you should know about it,” he said finally, exhaling a shaky breath. “I think it will explain a lot.”

~*Jensen*~

Something like concern flickered in Jared’s eyes, but he made no move to stop Jensen, so he took a deep breath and willed himself to have some courage.

“His name was Adam,” Jen started his story, keeping his eyes trained on Jared’s chest as his fingers played idly with the buttons there. “He was basically a grade-A dick, but I was naïve and he was my first boyfriend…” Jensen sighed softly, once again berating himself for his stupidity. “He was charming and sweet and thoughtful and kind, at the beginning. I knew I didn’t love him, but I guess I thought I could grow to love him, you know?” Scrunching his eyebrows, Jensen tried to put into words the feelings that were swirling through him. “I always figured love was something developed, not found, but then…” he stopped himself abruptly, and the words died on his tongue: But then I met you, and I realized love was instantaneous, like a meteorite striking across your path. Shit.

He couldn’t say that!

Too soon, Jensen, too soon! Back it up!

Biting the inside of his cheek, he hurried to speak, hoping to gloss over his blunder. “It doesn’t matter. What does matter, is that I learnt that sometimes, bad things happen.” He sighed once more, fingers tightening marginally on the button he was almost pulling loose, at the same time that Jared’s fingers on his hips pressed a little harder. Fleetingly, Jensen registered that Jared was tensed, wound like a coil.

“Anyway, he got jealous. Really jealous. He hated Cas, and cut me off from the few people I was friends with in school. He got really controlling and overbearing, and I mean, I think possessive is hot, to an extent, but he crossed the line, I mean…” Jensen knew he was babbling now, and the only thing that stopped him was the slight shaking that reverberated through Jared’s entire frame. Jensen leaned back a little to peek at his boyfriend.

Jared’s eyes were screwed shut and his jaw clenched, the epitome of barely restrained and concealed rage. Ordinarily, given his history of abuse, this would have scared him…Jensen wondered why he still felt safe, and the absolute furthest from afraid.

Placing his palm over Jared’s heart, Jensen tried not to notice the harsh and rapid thumpthumpthump that beat raggedly against his sensitized skin. Placing the other hand over the taller boy’s overheated cheek, Jensen maneuvered himself until he was facing Jared head on. Instinctively, he matched his breathing pace with Jared’s and thereby forced him to slow his breathing to match a more even pace than Jensen slowed down to.

“Calm down, Jay,” he murmured soothingly, lowly. “It’s okay now.”
“What line did he cross, Jen?” Jared asked roughly, opening his eyes to reveal turmoil and searing anger. In that moment, Jensen knew Jared could never find out about the abuse at home. Hands gripped tighter and eyes searched desperately, but Jensen could only feel every atom in the glow of concern and compassion and—dare he say it?—love, that Jared was showing him with every shadow of a caress with his arms, his eyes, his lips.

“Jared…” the breathy exhalation only served to tighten his boyfriend’s features even further, with an unlikely combination of love, fear, compassion, pain, and utter fury.


“Don’t do this to yourself,” Jensen tried again, but this time? He knew his efforts were pointless.

“Did he…” Jared propped himself up on one elbow, running a haphazard hand through his hair before settling it back on Jensen’s hip, gulping convulsively as you would dry-swallow a large pill. “Did he touch you?”


“That sick son of a bitch!” Jared snarled, bolting upright. Jensen hastened to follow him up, placing his forearms over Jared’s in a motion meant to calm.

“He hit me, Jay,” Jensen said calmly, almost detached. “Nothing more. Before your mind goes to all those places, he only ever physically assaulted me.”

“Only?” Jared scoffed, as his trembling grew more pronounced. “I’m going to rip his fucking throat out and tie his hands together with his esophagus,” he snarled, and for a moment, Jensen worried that his boyfriend was making less of a threat and more of a promise.

“As vivid a picture as that is,” Jensen frowned momentarily, “how about we not do that, and then pretend that we did, huh? Less jail time, less psych evaluations? Besides, he has little tiny T-Rex hands, he’d just slip right out.”

Jensen’s quip had the desired effect; Jared glanced at him for a moment in shock, before releasing the stiffness in his posture and huffing out the most begrudging of laughs.

Jensen grinned and took both of Jared’s hands in his own, synchronizing their breathing once more. After a little while, Jared gently took the lead, and pulled them both back to the position they were in before. He scooted a little closer once they’d settled, until his forehead was pressed against Jensen’s.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized softly. “I kind of lost control over there. That was the last thing you needed.”

“It’s okay,” Jensen shrugged it off lightly. And it was. He would go so far as to say it was nice to be stood up for. “I feel safe around you,” he confessed shyly, unwilling to bring his eyes to meet Jared’s.

“Good,” the boy’s voice sounded choked as he pulled Jen closer. “Good, I’m glad.” They sat in silence for a few minutes, each boy lost in their thoughts. “How long, Jen?”

Jensen sighed quietly at the question he’d been expecting. “Two months, until one day I landed in a hospital and caught a wake-up call. No one knows about what happened, not a soul, except you.”

Jared was quiet for a few breaths, absorbing this new information and likely tamping down his temper. Finally, he nodded and pressed his lips with infinite gentleness to Jensen’s temple. “Thank you for telling me.”
“You deserved to know,” Jensen replied, shifting uneasily as a new thought occurred to him. “It’s going to be real fun telling Chris this story.”

Jared actually snorted. “Yeah, maybe don’t mention a name. If I’m just barely stopping myself from hunting the son of a bitch down, you know Chris is going to tear up the state until he gets his hands on him.”

“I’ll never understand why he’s so protective,” Jensen chuckled fondly, “but I appreciate it more than I can say.”

“Ask him,” Jared suggested, trying to adopt an aloof tone and failing dismally. “It might be good for you two to exchange stories.”

Jensen nodded thoughtfully, not wanting to ask anyone but his best friend about this story. They sat in silence, drawing strength and comfort from their presence next to each other.

“Jay?” Again, it was Jensen who broke the silence.

“Mm?”

“Can I tell you a secret?”

Jared leaned back to look into Jensen’s eyes again, relaxing when he saw the smile there. “Shoot.”

“I liked The Titanic better; but it made me cry, and Cool Runnings made me believe in the impossible, so I’ll never admit to liking the former.”

“Huh…well played, Jen. Well played.”

###

“It’ll be fun! What’s the bet we don’t even miss anything, really? Come on, live a little!”

Chris looked at Jensen with a mixture of amusement, doubt and suspicion. “Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?”

Jensen snorted. “Come on, Chris, I’m talking about skipping class, not robbing a bank or ganking the president.”

“Jen, you’d sooner assassinate the whole freaking White House than to bail on Art.” Chris pointed out, and Jensen pouted at how well his best friend knew him. Honestly, it would suck to bail on Art, but they couldn’t afford to bunk Math or English or History or Geography, and this was Chris’ only free, so Jensen was willing to make a sacrifice.

“We hardly ever have the opportunity to hang out anymore,” Jensen frowned. “We’re always around people now.”

“And whose fault is that?” Chris teasingly sniffed. His brow scrunched as he considered another thought. “Whoa, Freckles, if you want to stay up all night, braid each other’s hair and spill the down and dirty about Padalecki, let’s not, and then say we did.”

Jensen raised an eyebrow and smirked condescendingly. “Ok, first of all, who the hell still says down and dirty?” Chris flipped him off and Jensen snorted. “Secondly, you have a pretty set stereotype about gay guys, you know that, Kane?”

Chris grinned. “Nope, Freckles, it’s just my assumption of you.”
“Bitch,” Jensen rolled his eyes with a smile. “Now bunk with me! Come on, Chris, if we get caught, I’ll take the heat.”


Jensen grinned victoriously. “You lo-ove me!”

“Not in the Big-Gay-Love kind of way,” Chris blushed, choosing sarcasm over admitting he cared.

“Not even in your dreams, Chris,” Jensen winked.

“You’d be lucky to have me, Jerk!”

Their banter continued as they walked, no real destination in mind. Jensen was surprised when they ended up in a park, but Chris didn’t seem to share the feeling.

“I haven’t been in a park since I was…” he thought for a long moment. “Seven years old.”

“I love coming out here to think, especially at night, or at sunrise,” Chris revealed in a low voice. Jensen nodded wordlessly and they settled on the jungle gym, Chris splayed out on the climbing net and Jensen perched on the ladder leading up to the top of the slide.

Jensen knew his best friend better than he gave himself credit for. Instinctively, he could tell that Chris wouldn’t offer up his story first, not for any other reason than the fact that he would feel like he was burdening Jensen by telling him it. If Jensen told him the Adam story first, then at least he would feel like they’d be on even footing…right?

“Chris, I have to tell you something…” Jensen hesitated, then ploughed on. “Promise you won’t freak out.”

~*Chris*~

Christian Kane was, for the most part, a calm guy. People were scared of him, no doubt, but that was because people were always afraid of what they couldn’t predict, of what they couldn’t understand. Their fear of him was not something justified by any one incident where he lost his temper or bench-pressed a semi, or some other ridiculous shit that people made up. Their fear was because of the fact that he was quiet, observant, unruffled. Sharp as a tack and quietly lethal, he was a lone wolf, in every sense of the word. He loved his pack-mates to the depths of his heart, but he could not find it in himself to be a part of them, always feeling the weight of his past pressing down on him, a phantom heaviness that settled over his shoulders and heart.

Until Jen.

Mysteriously enough, when the light-haired, green-eyed boy snarked his way into Chris’ heart, he had done more than just bring light into Chris’ darkened world, done more than just bring company into his life of loneliness. Unexpectedly, Chris had found family in this human boy, more so than he had even found with the pack, relating to him on a level that only a brother could; they were always on the same wavelength, and never out of tune with each other.

And it was the damndest thing.

When he realized that he would have to be spending time with the pack if he wanted Jen to be happy
with Jared, he had initially been horrified. He’d thought of a million different ways to get out of it, and had eventually decided on going cold turkey on Jensen; he’d made a place for himself in the pack, integrating himself beautifully, gracefully, until everyone there adored him except for Sandy, the queen bitch, and subsequently Milo the Minion. The last thing Chris wanted to do was to take that away from Jensen due to his inability to be social.

Jensen never knew it, but he was planning on starting his gradual break-off that day that Jensen found him by the lockers. But then he had to go and show more loyalty than Chris ever knew was possible without a blood connection. Jensen would never know it, but that day Chris decided that if Jensen would choose him over the pack, stick with him even when he’d gotten Jared, then Chris could never drop him. He had to prove that he was worthy of such loyalty by showing such loyalty in return.

Knowing all this, you can only imagine his surprise when they hung out with the pack, and there was no crushing feeling of guilt and no feeling of being out of place. Somehow, with Jensen at his side, the odd heaviness lifted, and if Chris were about waxing poetical, he would have said that by being there, Jensen took on half the burden until Chris couldn’t even feel it anymore.

Whatever had happened, he now actually felt a little like he belonged in the pack. He got along well with everyone who didn’t have a problem with Jen, and surprisingly, even Chad was beginning to grow on him. He could appreciate the fact that the blond boy had given Jen a chance to earn his respect and had acted accordingly thereafter. Now that they had, Jen actually got on with Chad like a house on fire, even as he always maintained this unfathomable closeness with Chris, no matter what.

So yes. Christian Kane was a relatively calm guy. But all that changed when someone messed with his best friend and brother.

“That son of a bitch!” he snarled viciously, trembling as his anger manifested itself, his body begging to shift, hunt the fucker down and tear him limb from limb. “Give me his God damned name, Jen!”

“So you can earn yourself a shiny new criminal record and a cozy little jail cell?” Jensen retorted evenly. “I’m gonna pass.”

“Jensen Ackles, give me his name, or so help me God…” Chris let his voice trail off in an ominous threat, annoyed at his friend’s inherent goodness.

“So what? You’re gonna beat it out of me?” Jensen snorted impishly at the irony. Chris, on the other hand, couldn’t find it in himself to be amused.

“Not funny, Jen,” he grouched. His insides still churned with the knowledge that his best friend had endured two years of hell at the hand of some low-life. His temper simmering below the surface, Chris decided to aim his anger at a slightly more tangible target. “Where was Cas during all this?” he demanded.

Likely sensing Chris’ diverging fury, Jensen hastened to answer, putting out a placating hand palm-up. “Cool it, Chris. Cas, to this day, knows nothing about it. No one does, save for you and Jared.”

That shut Chris up immediately. Though he was humbled beyond belief at the fact that Jensen trusted him enough to tell him something he hadn’t even told his best friend of at least 6 years, he was also furious that the bastard hadn’t paid at all for hurting the other boy.

“Jen,” his voice gentled in compassion for the secret Jensen had carried with him. “Why didn’t you tell your parents, or report him to the cops?”
Jensen flinched and Chris frowned suspiciously, his radar going up. Before he could begin his Spanish Inquisition again, Jensen blurted out:

“I was adopted. My foster mom died when I was 8.”

Chris felt his chest constrict as his breath left him with a whoosh. How much had Jen had to endure in his short life? Chris wrote off his suspicion, figuring that the loss had caused a rift between Jen and his father, or Jen had had some kind of twisted shame from the whole event. He nodded understandingly, fighting against his instinctive misgivings when Jen almost slumped with relief at his acquiescence.

“I wanted you to understand,” Jensen concluded, settling down and redirecting his gaze skywards. “I appreciate how protective you are, and I wanted you to understand why I can get so hesitant and tense around crowds.”

“It’s understandable, Jen,” Chris comforted gruffly. He was proud of his friend for his strength, and told him as much. Jen shut his eyes and deflected the compliment with sarcasm, and Chris wondered whether the asshat ex-boyfriend was the reason Jen had such a warped perception of his worth.

Chris made a mental note to wrestle the dick’s name out of Jared, who undoubtedly was privy to that information.

Shifting his head to the right, Chris saw that Jensen had closed his eyes during Chris’ little internalized rant. He carefully studied the other boy’s unmoving profile, glad to see some facsimile of peace on an expression that by all rights and demands, should be twisted with anger and darkness.

Jen’s breathing was a little more labored than usual, and that alerted Chris to the realization that telling his story had taken more out of Jensen than Chris could have guessed.

He began to think on his past. On his story. For years, he had blamed himself for what happened 9 years ago, and it had changed him in ways that a 9-year old had no business knowing. Jensen had brought back some of that little kid inside him, made him remember the Chris he used to be. The Chris he was proud of being. The loving, caring, perceptive, protective, steadfast and loyal Chris, as opposed to the reticent, reclusive, self-condemned Chris with little to no patience for people and a self-worth that was basically non-existent.

Was that not grounds enough for Jensen to be deserving of the truth?

It didn’t take a second to answer that question. Jen deserved the whole story.

“I used to be an older brother,” he blurted out of the blue. Jensen didn’t even flinch, but he did open his eyes and bring his gaze to Chris, who now looked resolutely at the suddenly fascinating shapes of the clouds above him. “And a son.”

“What happened?”

Just the firm, deep, calming timbre of his best friend’s voice and Chris found his story pouring from his mouth, almost unbidden.

“It was just me and my younger brother, Hardison. He was 6 when it happened. See, my parents had made friends with some…travelers,” Chris stopped himself from saying “A travelling pack.” “I suspected that they weren’t all they claimed to be. They just seemed a little off to me.” Chris shuddered, remembering the cold flush that spread through him the minute he’d met the three big wolves. A pack consisting solely of an Alpha, a Beta and an Omega wasn’t uncommon a few centuries ago, when pack wars was a more common occurrence and humans began to question their existence and attempt to trap and hunt them. In these times, however, given the newfound
independence of Omegas and the work put into eradicating the brutalization of packs by reigning
powers of the hierarchy, it was nearly unheard of to find a pack of 3 traveler wolves. It was this that
fascinated Chris’ parents, and it was also what had set off Chris’ internal alarm bells. “I didn’t trust
them, for some reason,” he picked up his tale, “and I told my parents that, but they thought I was
watching too many bad horror movies.” Chris swallowed convulsively against the bitter tang at the
back of his throat, on his tongue, his palette. “They knew our house, and they broke in. I was playing
hide and seek with Hardison at the time, I was hiding in a closet…I saw everything,” he confessed,
his voice breaking. “I saw them ransack the house, beat and kill my parents…they made Hardison
watch, and he was…he was screaming for me…I was just…I couldn’t…I…”

It dimly registered in Chris’ mind that he was gasping for the breath his lungs starved for. It felt like
his airways had closed, until suddenly warm, heavy arms draped themselves across his shoulders,
around his chest. Reassuring murmurs in a voice as smooth as whiskey and sweet as honey tumbled
into his ear; he focused on that voice, on the gentle rumble that spread along his back from Jen’s
chest, on the encompassing arms that promised to hold him together while he couldn’t do it himself.
He realized belatedly that he was clutching on to Jen’s arms, but he couldn’t find it in himself to be
embarrassed with his brother. He hadn’t thought or spoken of that night in 9 years, and now it was
like all the emotions he’d bottled up since then was spilling out.

“I got you, Chris, I got you buddy,” Jensen was soothing him. “You’re safe now, I got you man…I
got you.”

With those words, Chris’ chest opened up, his airways free once more. He gulped in grateful
lungfuls of air, feeling it when Jen’s body relaxed in relief. Regulating his breathing and working
past the panicked frenzy of flashing memories behind his eyelids, Chris finished his story in a choked
voice.

“They killed Hardison, and then they came after me. I only realized then, that they knew I was
hiding there. They just anted to make me watch. I bit one of them, restled free and ran for my life. I
ran into one of our neighbors, and they called it in. We never caught the bastards,” he shook his head
in disgusted regret. “But one day, I will, and I’ll make them pay. I won’t go looking for them,” he
reassured, when he caught the flash of a frown from Jensen. “But the world isn’t a big enough place
for them to evade me forever.”

“Chris, I…” Jensen shook his head, his voice thick. Cautiously, he wrapped his arms around Chris,
holding tighter when Chris relaxed in the embrace rather than pushed him away. “I’m so sorry you
had to go through that,” he mumbled. “No child should have to…God, Chris, I’m sorry.”

“I should have protected him, Jen,” Chris whispered, tortured. “He was my baby brother. He was my
responsibility. He…”

“…would have wanted you to be safe and alive,” Jensen butted in, fixing Chris with a sympathetic,
but firm look. “You were shock, Chris. You were 9 years old, for Christ’s sake! What did you
expect from yourself? Besides you couldn’t have helped Hardison,” he pointed out gently. “You
would have just died next to him.”

“That would still have been more honorable,” he argued, flinching when blazing anger sparked
green gems.

“Don’t you ever say that, Chris,” he condemned lowly, the soft growl more effective than any
shouted threat. “Don’t you do that.” Shaking his head against the unpleasant thought, Jensen asked;
“So what happened after that?”

“I was the last remaining kin, so I inherited enough to live comfortably. Jared’s dad, Gerald
Padalecki...he really helped me out. He and Sherry, Jared’s mom, they took me in for a long time, I don’t know whether Jared ever told you that.” Jensen shook his head, and Chris was oddly touched by Jared’s display of loyalty. “Gerald Padalecki helped me become an emancipated minor when I turned 16 and I moved out. I still visit, on occasion. I owe them a lifetime.”

The best friends, the brothers, sat for a long time in silence. It was a companionable quiet, comfortable and safe.

“Chris,” Jen finally murmured. “I’m glad you got out alive. Life would suck without you.”

Chris’ eyes burned with emotion as he fought to answer without sounding choked up. “Life would suck without you too, Freckles,” he said softly, warmly, before sobering up to confess. “Jen, you’re like a brother to me. It hasn’t even been that long, but you’re like my little brother. You actually remind me of Hardison a bit...” he smiled nostalgically. “You would have liked him, and he would have liked you too. With you, it was like I was being given a second chance to be a big brother. I won't let you down, Jen,” he vowed. “I promise.”

Jensen nodded, feeling the weight of the promise wrap around him like a safety blanket. “I know, Chris. That goes for me too.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Ok, don't hate me! Still one more chapter before the date, but y'all have my word, there will be ample cuddling fluff and clothes sharing!

Love y'all! ;-)
Caught out

Chapter Notes

SURPRISE!! I worked my ass off and ta-da! Don't hate me, please! It's a pretty angsty chapter, but I felt this needed to happen before their date, and I promise it'll be resolved by the next chapter!

Shout out to all my wonderful readers! Special mention to j2_is_life! I missed you last chapter, girl! Hope you're still hanging there with me!!

Also to Loveistruelove; more belt looping as promised!!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*Jensen*~

After much careful contemplation and in-depth pondering, Jensen had come to a conclusion.

Alcohol sucked out loud.

Sure, he’d tried it, and sure, he’d enjoyed it. But that was a controlled intake of it, and Jensen knew from personal experience, that in excess, it was trouble with a side of fucking hell.

###

“I had no idea that had happened to him.”

Jensen felt a small tremor ripple through him as he contemplated what hell that must have been for his best friend. Jared tightened his arms around him where they sat, Jensen’s back to Jared’s chest, staving off the sick feelings and leaving him feeling safe, protected, and pleasantly warm. Unthinkingly, he turned his head to snuggle into the crook between Jared’s shoulder and chest. Like it was a chain reaction, Jared dropped his head, resting his cheek atop Jensen’s head. An innate peace fell over Jen, one he hadn’t felt in over a decade, and as hesitant as he was to label the luxurious feeling, he would be lying if he called it anything less than a sense of belonging.

A contented sigh escaped his lips and he felt Jared smile against his hair. “I’m glad you’re in my life,” Jensen whispered, almost inaudibly, terrified of confessing an inkling of the strength of his feelings for the boy he’d been with all of 2 weeks. Was it ridiculous, how strong he felt in such little time? Jensen had never believed in love-at-first-sight, but what else could explain the all-consuming fire in him? The fireworks that went off in him that had Jared’s name etched all over it? His stomach twisted with nerves, uncertain of himself and speaking his heart’s purest truth. Had he ruined what they had going by falling too hard, too fast?

But then, Jared surprised him every day, in almost everything he did. Jensen felt like they could read each other’s minds for how often they were on precisely the same wavelength, but then Jared would go and do something that would just defy everything Jensen expected and he was reminded how new they were. It was a roller-coaster, and Jensen never wanted to get off.
“I’m glad you’re in my life too, Jen,” Jared murmured, shifting to the side to press his lips to the crown of Jensen’s head. “I don’t ever want to lose you.”

The very possibility of that knotted Jensen’s throat into a mangled mass that threatened to choke him. He didn’t know what was going on with him, why this relationship meant more than the world to him, but he knew this:

*He could not lose Jared.*

Losing Jared? That would be like losing life. It would be ripping his heart straight out of his chest and tearing the rest of him to ribbons. It would be tying a noose around his neck and cutting off his breathing. It would be starving him of food and nourishment. It would be leaving him tied up in the middle of the hottest desert without any water.

No. that was a lie. Losing Jared, would be *so* much worse than *any of that.*

Rather than dwell on a possibility that would destroy him, Jen huddled closer still, glad that the upcoming dusk was bringing a slight chill to blame it on. Upon his and Chris’ arrival at school, Jen had insisted on Jared following them so that Chris didn’t have to drive alone. He was adamant that he was okay, but Jen was loathe to leave him so emotionally vulnerable. It took a fair amount of reassurance from Chris for Jen to leave him at his little house just out of town, but eventually, the green-eyed boy was persuaded to curb his mother-hen instincts.

Instead of going home, Jared and Jensen went back to school, lounging on the bleachers long after the track-team had vacated the grounds. It was a rare night off from football for Jared, and Eric had the 6 to 6 shift at work, so neither boy was in a hurry to end their time together in their personal bubble of happy togetherness.

They watched the sun disappear behind the forest-like growth of trees that ran along the borders of their school football field, a comfortable silence between them born from contentment and the peace they seemed to find only in each other’s company. Jared’s hand was absently tracing a pattern on Jensen’s hip, while the other hand was hooked lightly again, in Jensen’s belt loop. This small gesture spoke of possession, but to Jensen, it also spoke a little of fear. Fear to let him go in the event of losing him.

Maybe he was looking too much into it, but Jen kind of liked any gesture on Jared’s part that spoke of holding on to him. Holding on to *them*, even if Jen didn’t quite deserve someone as amazing as him.

Jensen wasn’t even surprised by how similarly their thoughts ran, when Jared sighed. “I wish we could stay here forever.”

Jensen’s heart swelled even as he joked lightly back, “Stay in school forever? I was kind of hoping to graduate this year.”

“Smartass,” Jared huffed playfully as Jensen snickered. Jared shifted his position slightly, and Jensen moved to get off him, embarrassed at the thought that Jared had been uncomfortable. “No,” Jared protested softly, holding him in place with his arms. “I was just squirming because I wanted to tell you something.”

Mollified, Jensen snuggled back into place and directed his gaze to the sky that was a fascinating blend of pink and orange and white and blue, sensing that speaking would not be made any easier on Jared with him staring at the long-haired boy.
“Jen,” Jared’s voice was hesitant, “what do you think about…how do you feel about your future?”

For some reason, Jensen’s insides twisted. Unsure as to what exactly was being asked of him, he turned to his default setting. “I think it’s great and all, but not really my type…”

Jared snorted, tension melting off him. “Smartass,” he repeated fondly. “No, I mean, where do you see yourself going? We’ve got a whole year, but it’s going to fly by.”

Jensen thought carefully about how he was going to answer that. “I don’t know, Jay,” he hedged. “I’m not sure yet, where I want to take my life.”

“I guess I’m not entirely sure either,” Jared admitted. “I want to help people, that’s about the extent of what I know.”

“I guess it’s okay not to know yet,” Jensen shrugged. “That’s what this year is for.”

“Have you…have you thought about…” Jared began to fidget once more as he mumbled something under his breath.

“Thought about…?” Jen asked gently.

“Who you want to spend your future with,” Jared finished, tensing unconsciously.

Jensen mirrored the action, feeling restricted in his boyfriend’s embrace as terror incapacitated him. Was Jared already trying to tell him that he didn’t want him in his future? Was it something to be worried about, the fact that when Jen thought of his future now, the only clear thing in front of him was Jared? Was their relationship about to crash and burn before it even properly began?

“I…um…” he squeaked, turning red. “Uh…I guess I don’t know…I think…” he fudged clumsily.

“Me too,” Jared replied immediately, sounding abrupt. “I mean, it’s not like I expected…we’ll end up meeting new people and…and then…”

Pain so intense that Jensen almost doubled over with the sheer force of it, ripped into him unforgivingly. He felt bile rise in the back of his throat and he ripped himself away from Jared, an instinctive response, his body craving from years of experience to get away from the source of the pain.

But God, this was worse than any pain that he’d experienced before. It was harsher, more raw, and even at his best attempt to move away, shield himself, the pain just followed him wherever he went, an ache bone deep that overshadowed any physical pain. He felt like he was drowning in liquid fire, and God, how could he have ever let himself hope for forever? He knew better than that!

“I have to go, it’s getting late…” he heard the words coming out from his mouth, like an out-of-body moment, and felt himself rise to his feet without his mind even registering his body’s motions. Sluggishly, he comprehended the fact that he was stumbling down the steps, getting away from Jared as fast as he could without tipping him off to his pathetically soul-crushing grief. He thought he heard Jared call out his name, a pain-filled, regretful sound, and he clenched his eyes shut as he hit the ground and broke into a run, eager to get away from the kindness in Jared’s pitying gaze.

He couldn’t recall getting home if his life had depended on it. What he did recall, was seeing Eric’s car in the driveway.

When it was already 7.30pm.
Terror bundled on top of his already frayed emotions, Jensen edged towards the house, trying in vain for some indication of what to expect inside.

Opening the door slowly, he was greeted with screaming silence and oppressive darkness. Feeling sick to his stomach with nerves, he flicked the passage light on, and his first shuddering intake of breath assaulted his nose with the vile stench of liquor.

He shut the door and made his way to the kitchen on shaky legs. Eric was leaning against the counter, whiskey in hand, beer bottles lining the table behind him. One glance at the whiskey bottle confirmed that this was not Eric’s first taste of the good stuff that night. His posture was relaxed, but it was in the way that he wasn’t looking at Jensen that set alarm bells off in his mind.

“I…I thought you had the graveyard shift today?” Jensen squeaked, voice trembling. He nearly jumped a foot into the air when Eric broke his immobility to throw one of the empties against the opposite wall in a flash of movement.

“Is that your excuse for being 4 and a half hours late?” he asked quietly, the steady, calm voice contrasting his reaction sharply and being somewhat more terrifying than any of the times he’d shouted. Jensen suppressed a whimper, his fear getting the better of him as he stood, already emotionally shredded.

“I’m sorry…” was as far as he got before Eric was on top of him, raining fists of fury pounding into every available inch of skin. Alcohol sucked out loud, he decided again.

His knees gave out and he curled in on himself, a small sob bursting through his chest.

Truthfully? He took every blow happily, welcoming the familiar, physical pain over the crushing agony that seemed to grip him from the inside.

He took his beating, but even that had nothing on the pain that filled his heart at Jared’s four simple words, his unwitting confession.

We’ll meet other people.

~*Jared*~

“Jesus fucking Christ, Padalecki, do you try to be such a fucking moron or does it just come naturally to you?”

Jared winced at Chad’s growl. After his monumental screw-up with Jen, he was torn between his gut instinct to follow the green-eyed boy and hold him close and beg him to never meet other people, and his brain’s directive to give Jensen time to cool down lest they fight over something like this. In the end, he’d listened to his head, and naturally sought out his best friend for advice. Chad had looked ready to mock when he’d opened the door, but seeing the open look of pain on his best friend’s face had likely stolen that reaction. In a rare show of care, Chad had dragged him to his room, and sat silently opposite him as he told his story from start to finish.

Which, surprisingly enough, ended up in him being ripped a new one by aforementioned best friend.

On the one hand, Jared was glad his best friend had accepted his mate to the extent where he would defend him. On the other hand, it was a surprise, since Chad was usually on his side.

Chad softened slightly with a sigh when he noticed the slightly kicked-puppy look Jared was
“Look, buddy,” he leveled with him in an even rarer moment of seriousness, “Jen is a human. First off, he’s obviously been through some shit in the past. I don’t know what, but I know it was enough to make him pretty shaky on the trust scale. What’s he going to think now that you basically implied you wanted to break up with him after senior year, not to mention the fact that you’ve only been dating two weeks?”

“But he could have…” Jared began to protest, his insides clenching sickly.

“No buts!” Chad interrupted him, aiming a stern look at him. “Secondly, he’s a human!”

“You said that already,” Jared couldn’t help but snark.

“He’s your mate,” Chad continued, heedless, “and he’s a human. The fact that he’s human doesn’t make him any less susceptible to exactly what you’re feeling. Human or no, Jensen will feel, will know that there’s a profound bond between you two, and will feel about you just as strongly as you feel about him. That’s the beauty of finding your mate, but imagine the doubts and insecurities that would come from having these feelings and not totally understanding why.”

“How do you mean?” Jared asked in confusion.

“Love at first sight is not normal for humans anymore, Jay-Bird,” Chad sighed long-sufferingly. “It’s interpreted as flakiness, carelessness, lust, even. You understood this immediate, bone-deep love because you’re a Were and you grew up knowing the meaning of mating, and also because you could smell that Jen was your mate. To Jen, he has all the same feelings without any of the knowledge on what he’s feeling. He’s gotta be scared that he’s falling so fast, too fast, and he’s gotta be thinking that you’re probably not feeling as strongly as he is, since like I said, love at first sight is not really a thing anymore. He’s gotta be terrified that you guys aren’t going to last because he doesn’t know if you love him as much as he already loves you…and then you basically go and tell him that you’re not planning on lasting with him!”

Jared could feel his face paling with every word that left his friend’s mouth. He’d never thought of it like that…just assumed Jen would be accepting of the fact that they’d fallen in love. But Chad was right; which teenager fell in love within two weeks of being with someone? It was hard enough on Jen without the monumental mess up Jared had stirred with his wounded ego when Jen hadn’t immediately answered I want you in my future.

“Crap, I should have just told him I wanted him to be a part of my future,” Jared realized belatedly. Chad rolled his eyes.

“No fucking way, Sherlock. Give the man a medal.”

Jared grinned briefly; this was why Chad was his best friend. For all his goofing off, the blond-haired Alpha had an innate sense of the people around them, and oftentimes had an insight into them that rivalled even the ones closest to them. He could be a jackass sometimes, sure, but he as loyal and fair and dependable, and Jared could always count on him to tell it to him straight. Even when it came to sharing his insights on Jen.

Jared was instantly filled with an overwhelming desperation to get to his mate. To apologize profusely, beg him not to ever consider other people, plead with him on the idea of a future together. He couldn’t afford to mess this up; he had to take away all Jen’s doubts and insecurities, while bearing in mind that this was all terribly unfamiliar territory to him, even more so than it was to Jared.

Jared didn’t even bother to explain himself, knowing that with Chad, he didn’t really have to. He just jumped up and took off, laughing lightly when Chad’s shout filled the air around him.
“Go forth my son!” he yelled. “Make me proud!”

Jared made a mental note to hug his friend when he saw him next, before flipping him off.

It didn’t take too long for Jared to track his way to Jen’s house, having never been given the address before. He racked his brain for excuses to make as to how he found the house, coming up blank and hoping to hell Jen wouldn’t ask.

As he neared the house, unease began to build inside him, and he picked up his pace slightly in agitation. The feeling only worsened when he rapped on the door and it swung open a little bit. The stomach-turning, but unmistakable smell of his mate’s blood filled his nostrils and panic seized his insides. Probably courtesy to remembering Chris’ story, Jared’s mind pictured the worst.

“Jen?” The strangled sound left his throat as he staggered into the hallway, a dull roaring in his ears and the phantom grip of terror vice tight around his chest. He followed the smell, petrified that he was going to be met with the sight of…

Oh God.

Jen was lying on the floor in a fetal position, blood covering him. Through the panic-induced fog that clouded his mind, Jared made out the tell-tale signs of breathing, and relief nearly crippled him. The reality of the situation crashed into him and the roaring in his ears turned silent in a burst of clarity so sudden it was almost as though it had a mute button. A strange sound between a snarl of rage and a whimper of pain tore from deep inside him and he was sliding on his knees next to Jen in a second.

“Jensen!” he choked, pulling the barely conscious boy halfway over his lap. “Jen, baby, what happened? Oh, God, are you okay? I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so, so fucking sorry. I should have…I didn’t…if I had…God, Jen, please just look at me? Wake up? Let me see those big, beautiful eyes, Jen, open those eyes for me, baby, please?” he begged, barely cognizant of what he was saying.

He could have sobbed with relief when Jensen stirred, blinking blearily up at him. Confusion swam into unfocused green orbs, and Jared instinctively cradled him closer, needing to reassure him, to protect him.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s okay…everything is gonna be alright, I promise…I gotcha Jen, I gotcha…” he cooed, nuzzling the top of Jensen’s hair and the side of his neck, kissing every available space as he did. The green-eyed boy lifted his arms weakly to place them on top of Jared’s, his own show of reassurance.

Jared swallowed past the crushing grief and blinding rage with much difficulty, focusing for now on the love of his existence.

“Jay?” he mumbled, and Jared held him a little tighter, mindful of whatever injuries his boyfriend might have. “’M okay.” In spite of everything, Jared huffed out a tiny laugh.

“Of course you are, tough guy,” Jared murmured, his voice gruff with emotion. “Jen, baby, what happened? Who did this to you?” All the control in the world couldn’t have stopped the slight growl that perforated through this question. Whoever had dared to lay a hand on his mate, would soon be making a close acquaintance with his incisors.

Jensen tensed and tried to sit up, and with a sinking feeling, Jared knew that whoever had done this, had been the same bully that hit Jen the first time.

“Just give me a name, Jen, or a description. Anything?” he pleaded lowly.
“I don’t know, some guy followed me…” Jensen mumbled noncommittally, and even without his wolfy senses, he knew his boyfriend was lying.

**Who was he trying to protect?**

“Don’t lie to me, Jensen,” he snapped, his anger at the situation filtering in a way that he knew wasn’t fair.

“I’m not,” Jensen whispered tiredly, pushing himself up and nearly face-planting as he finally got vertical. Jared was next to him in an instant, steadying him, but Jensen pushed away the helping hand, irrationally angering Jared further.

“You were basically unconscious just a few seconds ago, Jen, would you please stop being stubborn and let me help?” he barked, feeling sick and disgusted with himself when Jensen instinctively flinched.

“I’m ok, I need to clean the blood before my foster father gets home,” he replied, his voice barely more than a pained slur. Jared’s heart clenched even as his insides flamed with disbelieving anger.

“We need to report this, Jensen!” he fought.

“We don’t need to,” Jen insisted stubbornly, taking deep breaths in an attempt to sound more regular, reaching for the cloth on the kitchen island, one arm wrapped around his abdomen and the other gripping the counters for support. Jared’s chest clenched in alarm at the thought of whatever injuries Jensen might have sustained; from the smell of it, the blood flow was staunching, and that was a crying relief, but Jen must have been in agony. Stubborn boy…

“You’re in pain,” Jared pointed out, trying to keep his voice level. “Please Jen, at least let me take you to the emergency room.”

Jensen gritted his teeth and pulled up his shirt, beginning to prod at the mass of bruises and cuts. Jared could only gape for a second, before regaining control of himself.

“Jensen!” he admonished with a frown.

“I’m fine,” Jen declared weakly, ignoring him and flipping his shirt down again. “Few bruised ribs at best, lots of cuts, and head wounds bleed like the Thames, but I’m okay.”

“When did you get your doctor’s degree?” Jared drawled sarcastically, scowling.

“I did an advanced first aid course,” Jensen mumbled. “I’m going to be okay.”

Jared may have believed that if Jensen hadn’t punctuated that with a drained sway back on to his heels.

Looping an arm around his waist, Jared bodily moved Jensen towards the chair in the room, depositing his precious cargo safely and delicately.

“Tell me who did this, Jen,” Jared demanded. A small voice inside him cautioned him; *don’t push him now. Don’t fight. He’s been through hell already.*

But then, when did Jared ever listen?

When Jen didn’t immediately answer, all Jared’s previous icy terror exploded inside him, and before he knew it, he was yelling.
“Who the hell are you protecting, Jensen? This guy beat you to a pulp, until you nearly blacked out, and still you want to keep him safe? You were supposed to tell us if something like that happened to you after the first time! God damnit, Jensen, how are we supposed to stop this from happening if you don’t seem to want to help?”

“Don’t yell,” Jensen requested quietly, his voice even, and for some reason, this set Jared off even more.

“I’m going to yell all I want, because God, Jen, I thought I’d lost you for a second there! I thought you were dead!” he hurled out. “Now you refuse to talk to me about it, you refuse to talk to Chris about it…Chris!” Jared flung his hands out, turning to face Jensen who was leaning in exhaustion against the table. “Have you told Chris yet? Of course not! I’m going to tell him! I’m going to phone him right now, and tell him exactly what’s going on!” Jared threatened, whipping out his cell phone and jabbing his thumb down on number 8.

“Leave Chris out of this…” Jensen slurred, trying again to stand up. Jared gritted his teeth in frustration and put the phone on speaker as it began to ring, preparing himself to go off on a tangent until Jen spoke to him about this whole damn mess.


Jared froze, his blood rushing to his feet and dismay gripping his body. Jensen too, had frozen, and looked at Jared now, wide green eyes begging for an explanation.

Silence descended over them, a thick coat of tension. Jensen looked lost and crushed and it broke Jared’s heart, but still he struggled to get into motion.

“Of course he probably did,” Chris continued obliviously, “I pulled off my parts of the plan perfectly.”

A choked, broken sound caught in Jensen’s throat and his face crumpled with pain. And this, finally, snapped Jared out of his inactivity.

“Jen…” his voice came out as a hoarse plea, and he reached out, flinching a little when Jensen took a step back.

“What’s the J.A.W. Initiative?” he asked in a wobbly voice. “What plan?”

“Jen, please…” Jared wasn’t sure what he was pleading for anymore, but he felt like he was on the verge of losing the most important thing of his existence.

“God, Jensen,” Chris’ breathy voice came over the speaker as it dawned on him. “Listen to me…”

“No!” Jensen forced out, getting up in a sudden motion that nearly had him toppling back on to the unforgiving ground. Jared reached for him, and it was like a punch to the gut when Jensen wrenched himself away from reach. “Just get out, Jared. Leave.”

“Jen, sweetheart, please,” he begged, tears leaping to his eyes. “It’s not…”

“What I think?” Jensen guessed bitterly, tears cascading down his cheeks. “It’s not what I think? How could that have been misinterpreted, Jared?”

“If you’d just listen to me…”
“You’d make up some fluffy white lie and we can pretend this never happened?” Jensen scoffed. “I had enough of that from Adam.”

Something in Jared snapped right then and he was overcome with anger. Without consciously realizing what he was doing, he flung a hand out in exasperation and caught the edge of one of the beer bottles he hadn’t noticed was strewn on the counter. It smashed to the floor and Jensen yelped, raising his arms over his head in fear.

Icy cold trickled down Jared’s spine and his mouth went dry. *What did that son of a bitch do to Jen?*

Jensen straightened, his face ravaged with pain. “Please just go, Jared,” he muttered, such defeat in his voice that it broke Jared’s heart all over again. “Please just leave. I don’t have it in me to play games anymore. I can’t.”

“Just let me explain, Jen, please…” Jared breathed, swiping a hand over his face to clear the salty tears there. Chris was saying something, Jared couldn’t even bring himself to try to listen to him, but it didn’t matter since the next words out of Jen’s mouth shut them both up.

“There’s nothing to explain.”

Jensen staggered feebly down the hall into a bathroom, the decisive *click* of the lock sounding eerily similar to the rip it made in Jared’s heart.

Leaving the house, walking away, Jared couldn’t have remembered doing that if he tried. When he finally tore himself from the *thud thud thud* of his feet against the pavement, he realized he was in front of Chris’ place. The blue-eyed alpha took one look at him and sighed cavernously, before inviting him inside. Jared didn’t realize he was crying the whole way until Chris tossed him a box of tissues.

“I lost him, Chris,” Jared said hollowly. “I messed up.”

“What happened?” Chris asked, more gentle than Jared expected.

After telling his story in jerks and stops, Chris was homicidally enraged. “Who hurt him?” Chris demanded, body trembling with the need to shift. “Don’t think I’m not going to address the fact that you hurt him first, but who beat him up?”

“I don’t know,” Jared answered miserably. “I fought with him for not telling me. I yelled at him. I pushed him.”

Chris made a frustrated noise at the back of his throat before throwing himself on to the ottoman opposite Jared. “Look, Fido, we’re both going to track Jen down tomorrow and apologize to him. He’s going to forgive us, he has to…we’ll beg and plead if we need to. Okay?”

Jared just nodded dolefully, leaving Chris’ place and walking a little bit until he reached the beginning of the forest before shifting and trotting to the clearing he had found a few years ago. It was his private place, and if any other Were had discovered it, they’d left it as his. Settling on to the grass, he buried his face in his paws, whining pitifully, the ache in his chest a prominent pain.

He shifted again and pushed his shaggy hair back behind his ears, gazing mournfully at the murky clouds above him that seemed to mirror his mood. He felt deserving of it when the rain began to fall, not moving to cover himself even when it began to pelt heavily down.

He just closed his eyes and let the rain mix with the tears still trickling down his face.
His heart ached and he could almost pretend he could smell Jen close by if he really tried. Some part of him realized he should be heading home, and on autopilot, he began to walk, the rain still drenching him.

Bone-deep exhaustion settled in him and by the time he reached the mouth of the forest, he was drained out. Sliding down the trunk of the nearest tree, Jared gave up on moving. He settled on the floor and closed his eyes, his tiredness winning out.

Before he passed out, the sound of his mate calling out for him filled his mind. Jared just wished it wasn’t only in his head.

###

Chapter End Notes

Again, please don't hate me! Plenty of fluff in the next chapter to make up for it, promise!!

JayGirl
Breakfast discussions

Chapter Notes

Okay, this chapter got so long I had to cut it off! Next chapter is the date, but I hope you guys enjoy the fluff that is here!

Special shout out to cheery_pie whose input I missed in my last chapter, and to j_2_is_life, who is such an awesome person!

Also, to all my readers and loyal followers, I love you guys so much! Thanks so much for the kind words and for sticking with me thus far!! You guys rock!! <3

Enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*Jensen*~

For someone who’d had more than their share of bumps and bruises and breaks and beatings, it sucked out fucking loud that Jensen had still never experienced as much pain as he did when Jared left.

As soon as he’d heard the door close from his hiding place (i.e. the downstairs bathroom) he’d wanted to stumble out and beg Jared to come back and explain, to tell him that everything wasn’t just a sick fucking joke.

But no. He stayed in the bathroom, choking on sobs and clumsily wrapping his bruised-to-hell ribs and the assortment of bruises and cuts littering his entire frame. Thankfully the cut on his head didn’t need stitches, so he just left that one after cleaning it out.

On the plus side, Jensen could pretend that he was sobbing from the patching up.

His gut gnawed uncomfortably with fear after he finished taping himself up. More than anything, he wanted to believe everything Jared was trying to say. After all, he’d made friends with Chris even before he’d met Jared, right? And what had Chris possibly done to make him want to fall in love with Jared? He’d never even thrown the tall boy compliments or anything.

What would woo you, Jen?

Jensen cursed lowly under his breath as he realized the intent behind Chris’ line of questioning that day. Honestly, he wasn’t sure whether that made him even angrier or whether that thawed him out some. Much as he wanted it to be as simple as that, he was still deeply hurt by both betrayals, even if Jared’s motive was “wooing” him.

He sat on the stairs and nursed his sore midriff, trying to sort through the jumble of emotions that were smothering him.

He thought back to the day he’d met Jared. That day in Chemistry, falling into his chest was an accident. Picking his name as a Science partner was coincidental. Running into him at the diner was happenstance.
Then Jared had kissed him.

Nowhere, not once in that equation, was there some sort of plan. Logically, Jensen knew that whatever Initiative Chris and Jared had started, probably wasn’t meant to harm him. Chris wanted to rip the heads off anyone who dared to glance at him wrong, and that reaction was tame in comparison to Jared’s protectiveness. In his heart, he could never see them deliberately hurting him. He knew what his real issue was, and he would have to talk to them about it, but he knew too, that he would forgive them. The betrayal of trust would be a little harder to forgive, but if he was entirely straight, he figured he could nurse his anger for a day, swear them, and then all would be forgiven too. Who could really stay mad at a betrayal aimed at wanting to give you happiness?

Things with Jared, after both their fights, complicated things a bit. Jensen thought back to their first tiff, at school, about their future. Jared had been so tentative to ask…Jensen had assumed that he didn’t want a relationship after high school. Did that make any sense though? After the way Jared doggedly pursued him, after all the promises sweetly murmured and all the confessions nervously whispered, did it make sense that Jared would put a timeline on their relationship? His broken heart ached to scream ‘YES!’ and leave it at that, but Jensen had long since vowed to listen to his head if his heart was broken and thinking irrationally. It was what got him out of his relationship with Adam.

On this logic, Jensen was hard-pressed to admit that it didn’t seem like Jared to take the time to woo him only to drop him after a year. Also, his actions and his expressions and that God damned look in those hazel eyes…all spoke of forever. And Jensen knew he wasn’t reading wrong, because like it or not, he knew how to read Jared.

In retrospect, Jensen guiltily conceded, he could have been less hesitant in his answer. Jared had gotten abrupt, and although it seemed unfathomable for someone as hot as Jared to have a fear of rejection, it wasn’t totally unheard of either. Jensen could have sucked it up and told Jared that he wanted him in his future, so that fight wasn’t without his fair share of the blame. Already forgiving him that, Jensen vowed to forget the incident in his mind, even as he wouldn’t forget the lessons it taught him.

Quite truthfully, Jensen wasn’t even mad at all the pushing and shouting Jared had done when he was demanding answers about who hit him. He wasn’t mad, because he could understand the reaction so very well. Even half-conscious, he remembered with vague clarity the moment Jared had walked in…

“Jen, baby, what happened? Oh, God, are you okay? I’m so sorry, baby, I’m so, so fucking sorry. I should have…I didn’t…if I had…God, Jen, please just look at me? Wake up? Let me see those big, beautiful eyes, Jen, open those eyes for me, baby, please?”…

It’s okay, baby, it’s okay…everything’s gonna be alright…I gotcha Jen…”

That amount of concern, that level of fear and upset, the utter love that couldn’t be disguised as it flowed through those words…it spoke volumes about Jared’s reaction. He’d shouted and gotten as upset as he did out of love for Jensen, out of a desire to protect him and the frustration that came from not being able to. If anything, Jensen appreciated his anger because it was more love than was shown to him in 10 years. Those tender hands lifting him, those loving caresses and nuzzles and kisses…how could Jensen ever be mad about that?

But, then…this J.A.W. Initiative.

Jensen meant what he had thought earlier; he couldn’t be very mad at a betrayal aimed at bringing him happiness. What was difficult to get over was the fact that he felt lied to. He wondered what of
him Jared really knew, and more than that, he wondered if Jared understood why he was most upset about this. The bottom line was that he needed to talk to them, soon.

He absently rubbed at his abdomen. Even after a couple hours, his gut still churned in pain combined with this sickeningly familiar twist of fear.

What was he afraid of?

The image of Jared’s crushed expression barged into the front of his brain. The sight shattered his heart and he whimpered as his eyes began to sting with tears once more. He was afraid for Jared? Why? Unbidden, the thought of worst case scenarios crossed his exhausted mind, of all the things a distraught and distracted Jared could get hurt by. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind before his cell rang.

Chris’ number flashed ominously on the screen, and while every atom in him wanted to ignore the call, the same way he’d been doing all night, his instincts were screaming at him to take this one. That didn’t mean he’d have to be gracious about it.

“Fuck you,” he answered, voice cracking with pain.

“Jense, please man, I’m sorry,” Chris sighed, sounding miserable. “Just don’t hang up. I need your help; it’s Jared.”

Jensen was fairly certain he’d never moved that fast before in his entire life.

Point blank ignoring the screaming protests of his traumatized body, Jensen shot up from his place and grabbed his set of house keys. “I’m on my way to you,” he told Chris shortly.

Moving quickly with injuries like his was like embedding salt in a bad open wound, but Jensen soldiered on, terror churning in him as he contemplated what could be wrong with Jared. Had he gotten hurt? Did he get jumped, or attacked by an animal, or hit by a car? Like the loop of a Final Destination marathon, horrible alternatives settled in his mind, spurring him on to move faster.

Deciding that this counted as an emergency situation, he boosted a car two blocks over- turns out people are very unobservant at 10 after 1 in the morning- and tramped the accelerator to Chris’ place, resolving to return the car before sunrise and buy himself something cheap to run around with.

At Chris’ place, Jensen flew out of the car, barely aware of whether he’d pulled the handbrake up or not. One hand still grasping protectively at his middle, he threw open the door, face set in pain.

“Chris!” he called out roughly, a harsh bark that he could barely recognize as his own voice as it was saturated with pain, fear, worry and panic.

The blue-eyed boy appeared immediately, rushing forward with a frown when he noticed the tell-tale signs of Jensen being wounded. Before he could wrap an arm around him in support, Jensen held up a hand, halting Chris’ progress. The sharp sting of betrayal still smarted in Jensen and as much as he knew this wasn’t the time to knock out their issues, he also knew that he wasn’t about to just pretend that nothing was wrong.

Chris stopped, a crestfallen expression coming over his face that almost changed Jensen’s mind. Almost.

“What happened?” Jensen asked, trying to bring the topic to focus. “Where’s Jared?”

“I don’t know,” Chris answered heavily, meekly following Jensen’s unspoken command to put their
fight on hold, an action uncommon of the Alpha.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Jensen asked, an edge creeping into his voice that he’d rarely heard before. “I thought he was here and there was something wrong.”

“He’s not here, and that’s what’s wrong,” Chris said grimly. “His mom phoned to see if he was here, and I covered for him, but that was 45 minutes after he left here. I haven’t been able to track him down, and I thought he’d gone to your house, but from your reaction I guess not.”

“Jesus, and this was how long ago exactly?” Jensen cursed, fear streaking through him and mixing with the lingering hurt to produce a volatile anger.

“About four hours ago,” Chris cringed.

Dozens of emotions sizzled underneath the surface, but in a show of maturity, Jensen pushed them aside to deal with the problem at hand. Fact of the matter was, he needed to find Jared and make sure he was okay.

“I’ll go south of here, you go north, on foot, we’ll meet back here when we find him,” Jensen instructed, more authoritative than he’d ever been before in his entire life. To an extent, it surprised the hell out of him, but with the threat of Jared being hurt, all bets were off. His shyness and uncertainty melted away because he had no time for those emotions to be clouding his judgment. All that was left was a steely determination to make sure Jared was okay, and if- God forbid- he wasn’t, then heads would be rolling.

Jensen turned on his heel before waiting to see whether Chris would follow his directive. He wasn’t entirely sure what was pushing him to head south, but something in his blood, something hidden deep in his soul, told him that the guy he loved- and he did love him, even though he had a moment of stupidity- was somewhere south of here.

As much as he wanted to try to take the time to understand what all these instinctive feelings he had about Jared meant, he also knew he couldn’t spare that time. He could berate himself later for falling into one of those flaky, love-at-first-sight moments, but now? He had a boyfriend to find.

Following these instincts proved to be a test of Jensen’s faith in himself. Calling Jared’s name and pushing forward in a move uncharacteristic of the Jensen that existed Pre-Jared, the green-eyed boy was forced to admit that somehow, Jared’s complete confidence and faith in him had rubbed off somewhere along the line. Reaching the forestry on the outskirts of town, Jensen hoped to hell he’d be able to find his way back to the main road if he went in.

Turned out, he didn’t have to.

Slumped against a tree at the forest mouth, Jared’s eyes were closed and he was unmoving, two things that damn near stopped Jensen’s breathing. His heart in his throat, Jensen stumbled to Jared’s prone form.

“Jared?” he choked. “Jay, wake up…” he shook his shoulder slightly, tears blurring his vision and his throat feeling as raw as though it’d been sliced open. With shaking hands, he pressed two fingers against Jared’s throat, sobbing in relief when a strong thudding beat against his icy fingers. Checking him over cursorily and determining that he had no injuries, Jensen yanked Jared’s still-unresponsive body to his, hugging him with a ferocity that actually didn’t surprise him.

He sent Chris a quick text to meet him back at the house, and then summoning a strength he didn’t even know he possessed, Jensen lifted Jared over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry, not wanting to
aggravate his middle by cradling him; he would be of no use to Jared unconscious and bleeding out
next to him. He trudged back the way he came, ignoring it when the cuts he’d patched up began to
bleed again.

When he finally got back, Chris sprinted to him, seeing his faltering steps and sensing that his
strength was just about tapped out. Dropping to his knees, Jensen allowed Chris to pull Jared’s arm
around his shoulder and transfer Jensen’s precious cargo to his shoulders.

“Do you have any clothes that would fit him?” Jensen asked quietly. “He’s soaked through, I don’t
want him to get cold.”

“Nothing,” Chris shook his head regretfully. “Why isn’t he waking up? Should we be taking him to
the hospital?”

“No,” Jensen shook his head. “I checked him over, he’s alright. He’s had a pretty rough night, this is
likely just his body’s way of forcing him to recuperate. He’s protecting himself.” Chris nodded,
looking reassured until he glanced down at Jensen’s own soaked t-shirt, which had made the blood
on it run and it looked a dreadful sight. “Put him in the car,” Jensen instructed. “We’ll take him to my
place and settle him down properly.” Jensen sighed; there was no point in trying to hide his house
from them anymore, he would just have to hope that there would be no more surprise visits.

They worked together wordlessly and Jen was glad Chris didn’t ask where the car came from. True
to his vow, Jensen dropped Chris and Jared off at his place, settling them in the sitting room before
quickly returning the car to its unsuspecting owners. His whole body was close to shutting down for
how much he’d pushed it past its limits.

Walking gingerly into the house, he was beyond relieved to see Jared stirring. Grabbing a towel from
the linen closet, he went to stand next to Jared as he came awake. Exhaustion-clouded hazel eyes
locked on him, making Jared look years younger. Softening slightly, Jensen held out the towel, and
when Jared made no move to take it, he stepped right in front of him, positioned between his knees,
and began to gently towel-dry his long locks of hair. Respecting their need to be alone for a moment,
Chris asked Jensen where the kitchen was, claiming he was going to bring some water for both of
them. In a succinct, low voice, Jensen answered him, still not looking away from Jared’s hair. Try as
he might, he couldn’t make eye contact just yet.

“Jen…” Jared murmured.

“Why would you just run off like that?” Jensen interrupted softly, his worry and anger and relief all
melting into his voice. “Why didn’t you go home?” His unspoken words hung heavily in the air; you
scared me senseless.

Jared didn’t answer, but the puppy-dog eyes he aimed at Jensen was effective enough. His anger
dissipated immediately and he laid the towel on Jared’s lap with a sigh.

“I’m going to get you some dry clothes, you’re wet to the bone. You want to take a shower?” Jared
nodded listlessly and Jensen’s heart squeezed in sympathy, but still he trooped wearily up the stairs to
grab a pair of Eric’s sweats and a hoodie. Jensen’s would never fit Jared’s tall body, and although the
size would be baggy on Jared’s leaner frame, at least he would be warm.

He hadn’t even been 10 minutes, so it surprised him (and unfortunately also warmed his heart) to see
Jared had cuddled on to the couch and fallen straight back to sleep, a cute little furrow to his brow.
As much as he worried about the taller boy’s comfort, he couldn’t bear to wake him up now. Gently,
he nudged Jared and maneuvered him into a semi-sitting position where he mostly slumped against
Jensen. He wrestled Jared’s still-soaked t-shirt off and, trying hard not to admire the expanse of


chiseled chest that would have made Adonis jealous, he tenderly pushed the sweatshirt over Jared’s torso, deciding that the jeans could stay.

Jared immediately curled back to sleep, and Jensen allowed himself the tiniest of smiles, deciding that now was as good a time as any in their relationship to find out that Jared was not a good person to wake up.

With a small frown, he realized that even in his head, he’d still referred to them as a relationship. Snap. It seemed that every part of him seemed inclined to forgive Jared.

Sighing, he pulled the afghan hanging over the back of the couch and draped it over Jared, absently pushing back a lock of hair that came over his eyes before he straightened up. Chris was waiting patiently, leaning against the archway leading to the living room, observing the show of love with a tiny bittersweet smile on his face. Jensen approached him warily, not wanting to talk just yet, but unwilling to fight either.

“I’ll just head back home…” Chris started uncertainly, scuffing the toe of his sneakers anxiously against the floor. Jensen smiled inwardly; so obviously repentant, Jen couldn’t find it in himself to doubt the sincerity of Chris’ friendship. While he might have before, he just couldn’t see any part of Chris doing anything unless he meant it.

He didn’t quite know where all this trust had suddenly come from, but damn if Chris and Jared, despite their little antics, weren’t the ones most deserving of that kind of trust.

And a little slack.

“You’re crazy if you think I’m going to let you walk back in the pouring rain,” Jensen stated quietly. “I don’t want you to get sick or hurt any more than I wanted Jared. Stay in our guest room tonight. I can lend you my sweats and a shirt.” Jensen didn’t even question whether Chris would hear his unspoken words; I’m not ready to fully forgive you yet, but you’re crazy if you think we can’t get past this.

“Are you sure?” Chris asked, a hopeful glint in his eye. Jensen nodded, happy knowing that Chris had heard what he couldn’t say.

“I’m sure.”

###

Never again would Jensen underestimate the power of a bath.

Sure, he loved showers; the pulsating jets of steaming hot water were his salvation more times than he could count. But at the moment, lying in scorching bath water did his bruises more wonder than he had ever thought possible.

Jensen had woken up before Chris and Jared, a product of last night’s drama playing on a loop in his head, and the pain he still felt scissoring through his body which felt, for all it’s abuse, like it had been through a meat tenderizer. Not wanting to wake either boy up with the noise a long shower would make, Jensen had decided to suck it up and take a bath.

And God damn, what a life-changer that had been.

The water was beginning to cool after the fourth time he’d refilled hot water to it, and his skin was beginning to prune, but Jensen’s muscles were looser and he was in much less pain that he had been in since last night. The bruises were there, and pretty spectacular, and time in the bath water had
given him ample opportunity to look at every scar and bump and bruise. He felt self-conscious of them all, aware now of just how much of his body was covered in scars from his past. Most of them were relatively small; a testament to his practiced ease of stitching himself up. There was one scar across his belly that he was most conscious of, because it was one he hadn’t treated himself.

That was from the time Adam had put him in the hospital.

But that was a story to think about…well, never again, hopefully. Closing his eyes against the memories that were trying to assault him, Jensen relaxed further down in the water, focusing on his breathing and gratifying in the small fact that the steam made that feat easier. Once he felt he could get out of the tub without doubling over in agony, he did so, unplugging the drain to get rid of the water and wrapping a towel around his waist. He darted quickly to his room, aware of the need to hide his scarred body from his guests, and quickly dried himself. Uncaring of his appearance, he took comfort over fashion and hastily donned his sweats and Cas’ old sweatshirt that he (still) had no intention of returning. Jensen snorted when he realized he generally only wore the sweater when he’d been beaten, because it was so baggy, it never touched the bruises. Nevertheless, he appreciated the small modicum of comfort it afforded him.

Padding softly to the kitchen, art folder and sketch book tucked neatly under his arm, Jensen checked on both his guests before setting his things down on the large kitchen table and rifling around the cupboards for something to make for breakfast. He’d fully restocked their pantry just a few days ago, after selling one of his paintings online, so he decided to make pancakes, bacon and eggs.

About half an hour later, bacon was sizzling on the frying pan, the pancake batter was mixed and ready to fry, and Jensen was sketching mindlessly as he stood by the stove, waiting to flip the bacon. His pencil was flying over the paper as he sketched, broad sweeping arcs quickly transforming into sharp little swipes as the need presented itself. As he worked, Jensen realized that the soft grey tones were taking on the shape of a starry sky. He’d drawn the stars, the murky looking clouds, and now, he was drawing the full moon, peeking out from behind a few wisps of a murky, more darkly shaded cloud. He hummed in approval, a low sound at the back of his throat. This was a moderate sketch, one he could make better with his paints. The sound of the bacon popping and footsteps coming down the hall brought him out of his reverie. Deciding that not burning breakfast was more important, Jensen turned his attention to the frying pan, busily flipping the pieces over and congratulating himself with an inward pat on the back when he found they were crisp to perfection. He didn’t have to turn around, though, to know it was Jared.

“My mom says I have an internal alarm bell that rings when I smell food.”

Jensen grinned ever so slightly as he piled the bacon on a plate. Switching another plate on the stove to low, he got out a spatula and a spoon and grabbed the pancake batter. “I hope you’re fine with bacon, eggs and pancakes?”

“Are you kidding?” Jared snorted. “I’m coming to live with you.” He stopped abruptly, and awkwardness pressed upon them. Jensen was sick of it by now; they needed to talk this out.

“I need to multi-task,” he waved the spatula to indicate his point. “We’re going to talk about this over frying pancakes.”

“Right now?” Jared asked uncertainly.

Jensen nodded determinedly. “Right now.”

###
It was the sound of gentle footfalls that woke Jared up.

He didn’t need to question how he knew it was Jensen, the scent of his mate wafting into his senses and confirming his thoughts. He awoke slowly, remembering last night in bits and fuzzy pieces.

Somehow, from the forest, he’d ended up in Jen’s house, on the couch. Even if he wasn’t so finely attuned to his mate’s feelings, the relief hanging off Jensen was almost palpable, so Jared assumed he’d been missing for some time. Judging from the lack of Feds and rapidly mass-produced milk cartons with his picture on it, no one had told his mom he’d been missing, so he dismissed that particular stress. His brain and body had chosen that particular moment to shut off against all the stress he was dealing with, and as such, his mind was sluggish and uncooperative. His mouth felt like it had been stuffed full of cotton wool and his body felt weighted down and clumsy. Even as Jen had dried his hair, so carefully as if he was made of glass, Jared couldn’t make himself offer to do it himself, or thank his mate for taking care of him. He decided to take a shower, try to restart his brain so he could talk to Jensen, who looked crushed with worry when he asked him why he’d run off. Unable to dredge up any kind of coherent response, Jared had simply sought comfort from the green pools of Jensen’s eyes. They had turned warmer at his gaze, and somehow, Jared hadn’t felt so lost after that. When Jen had left, he remembered wanting to curl up and wrap himself with the warmth of Jensen’s eyes and love.

And now it was morning. Apparently his mind and body had decided that it needed the rest of the night off, because Jared felt fine when he woke up now. The smell of sizzling bacon danced over his senses and he pulled himself up, realizing now that Jen had grappled with him enough to push a dry sweater over him. Padding softly on bare feet, Jared automatically gravitated to where he could smell his mate was. His stomach growled in appreciation of the smell and the fact that his mate was associated so closely with the smell.

Jared stopped in the doorway, glancing first at all the pencils and papers scattered over the table. Two books, both overflowing with loose pages, sat one on top of the other, and an array of stationery as well as larger sheets of papers were strewn over the countertop. His eyes traveled to where Jensen stood, taking out the bacon, a writing pad and pencil discarded on the counter next to him. His mom’s voice rang in his mind and he grinned inwardly at the irony.

“My mom says I have an internal alarm bell that rings when I smell food.” Really, he thought, my alarm bell rang when I smelt you.

Jared hated that he couldn’t see his mate’s face, and this fact alerted him to the fact that Jen was wearing a sweater clearly not his own, for how baggy it was on him.

“I hope you’re fine with bacon, eggs and pancakes?” the smile Jared heard in Jensen’s voice eased the ball of tension in his stomach, even as he filed the sweater away under “Questions To Ask Jen Later When He Isn’t Angry With Me”.

“And are you kidding?” he smirked unthinkingly. “I’m coming to live with you.” Jared froze as soon as the words left his mouth.

Fuck, talk about foot-in-mouth disease.

Jensen’s brow furrowed slightly in the middle and his lower lip jutted out before getting sucked into a vice grip between his teeth, in what Jared had come to recognize and label as his Serious Face.

“I need to multi-task. We’re going to talk about this over frying pancakes,” he asserted, jabbing his
big, flat spoon thing in the air to drive his point across. Jared briefly wondered why they would make a spoon flat and put slats in them, before he decided it was possibly best he didn’t know.

“Right now?” he asked, hating how hesitant he sounded, almost as though he’d actually asked what the big spoon was called.

“Right now,” Jensen nodded, pouring some of the batter on to the pan before leaving it to settle before turning to face Jared. “What on earth were you thinking, disappearing like that?” His voice was soft and gentle, but Jared could hear a shadow of the strain and worry his mate had felt in his voice. The Alpha took comfort from it; things could surely not be as bad as he thought if Jen still worried that much about him?

“I wasn’t thinking,” he admitted, deciding honesty was probably his best approach at the moment. “Everything just sort of crashed and burned when I walked away from here thinking that I’d lost you.”

The hitch in Jensen’s breath was what made Jared glance up, just in time to see his mate turn away, clear tears falling rapidly from both eyes.

This was all it took for instincts Jared didn’t even know he had to kick in, unable to stand seeing the love of his life in pain. He strode forward in two big steps and wrapped his arms tightly around Jensen. The green-eyed boy resisted at first, pushing weakly at Jared’s big biceps, but Jared persisted, holding tighter. He was rewarded when Jensen gave up any inclination to get away, and melted into Jared’s desperate embrace. The occasional tremor wracked his body as Jensen tried not to cry, and Jared tried to absorb each shiver and eradicate them with his warmth.

“I don’t ever want to lose you, Jen,” Jared murmured the words he’d spoken just the day before, and they hung heavier on his tongue as they took on a fiercer meaning. “I’m so sorry.”

“The future argument, that was all my fault,” Jensen hiccupped. “I choked. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! I wanted to tell you so bad that I wanted you in my future, but this is all happening so fast, and I don’t know how I could feel so deeply after such a little space of time, and…”

“Shh, Jen,” Jared hushed, brushing soft little kisses on Jensen’s hair and temple. “I know. I’m an idiot, I could have just told you myself. I just didn’t want to pressure you…Chad explained in very colorful detail, what an ass I behaved like.” Taking a deep breath, he pulled away enough to cup Jensen’s face between two big palms, placing a tender kiss to the corner of his mouth before pressing their foreheads together. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

Jensen sucked in a shaky breath, composing himself and dragging the back of his hand over his eyes roughly. “I think I forgave you for that a long time ago.”

“When?” Jared asked somewhat playfully, thumbs brushing with infinite gentleness to swipe away the tears Jensen had callously missed.

“About an hour after it happened,” Jensen admitted with a pout, scrunching his nose in that most adorable way he had and pulling away to put on the next pancake.

Jared laughed, feeling some of the tension leave his shoulders. He knew that the most important thing to apologize for, was the one thing they hadn’t spoken about yet, and he also knew that he owed Jensen an explanation and a groveling apology.

“Jen, about the J.A.W. Initiative…” he hesitated a split second before ploughing right into his story. “It was just an idea me and Chris had, so that I could woo you! It was nothing bad, I swear! In
retrospect, I guess that I shouldn’t have needed help wooing you, just that Chris was your best friend and I really didn’t want to mess this up, because God knows I’ve messed up plenty before, and I couldn’t afford to mess up with you, because you’re everything and I would have never forgiven myself if I’d messed up, of course, I’ve already messed up now…” he cringed, without stopping his monologue, “but that’s not the point, really, the point is that I thought I needed the help, but I actually didn’t, all Chris really did was tell me what you said, and it wasn’t- no offense, Jen- it wasn’t very helpful because it was all so generalized, but then we spoke on the phone the whole week and I never wanted to stop talking to you, and somewhere along the line I realized that you were right all along, and that I could woo you just by listening to what you said, not that it was difficult to do that because everything you say is just so interesting and different to other people, but fact of the matter was that the whole thing was just a way to try to make sure that I could charm you, and…”

“Jesus, Jared, breathe!!!” Jensen cut across his rant, alerting Jared to the fact that his highly amused mate had been trying to interject for several minutes now. Jared gulped in a mammoth breath, belatedly realizing that his chest was burning with a need for air. He grinned sheepishly at Jensen, who had an entertained little grin playing on his lips as he expertly flipped and then put on the last batch of pancakes. “Don’t pass out on me, Jay.”

Jared beamed, his heart soaring at the beloved nickname that had been glaringly missing for the past 15 hours or so. “Okay,” he managed to utter, a dopey smile still gracing his love-struck face.

“Jay,” Jensen started gently. “I figured all that out last night. I thought about everything, and the thing is, is that I don’t think you or Chris really get what’s bugging me about this. I was hurt that you guys lied to me, and inadvertently played me, but I can’t be too upset about that since you were trying to charm me, and that is by far one of the sweetest things anyone has ever done for me.”

“Jen…” Jared’s heart squeezed in pain. “Sweetheart, I never meant to…you know I never wanted to hurt you…”

“Neither did I,” Chris’ voice came from the entrance to the kitchen and it was a testament to Jared’s remorseful pain that he didn’t even hear the alpha coming.

“I know,” Jensen maintained quietly, looking between them both. “Even as mad as I was, I couldn’t even entertain the possibility that either of you wanted to hurt me. What gets to me is the fact that I gave that advice regarding Sophia, not me.”

“So I didn’t charm you right?” Jared asked in confusion.

“No, you did,” Jensen refuted, trying to figure out how to get his point across. “But everything I told Chris to do was things that were really sweet and thoughtful and great, which fits Sophia, because she seems like a nice person, but not me. Sophia deserves to be wooed with that much effort and time, she’s worth that. I’m just…”

“Stop!” Jared interrupted harshly. “You’re not just anything. You’re everything, Jen…God, you’re fucking everything. You’re worth all of that, and so much more…how could you even think…”

“Jensen,” Chris’ low timbre cut through Jared’s disbelieving fumbles. “Man, you’re upset because you think that you don’t deserve that level of adoration?”

Jensen nodded uncomfortably, busying himself by stacking the last of the pancakes next to the other ones. He lowered the heat and moved the frying pan, preparing to make the eggs, when he was gently pulled away from the stove and turned around to face Chris. Jared was still unable to comprehend how his mate had thought so far from the truth.
“You’re worth more than any of that, but the thing is, is that nothing in the world is worthy of wooing you,” Chris said steadily, his grip firm on Jensen’s shoulders. He moved one hand up to grip the back of his neck, maneuvering his face until their eyes met. “I would have told Jared to get you the sun, the moon and the stars if I thought he could.”

Jared watched as the weight of the words impressed itself upon Jensen, and tears made his boyfriend’s eyes shine. Both Jared and Chris meant those words, and Jared knew he would have to make sure that Jensen did too, someday soon.

“Fuck, Chris,” Jensen finally replied, and judging from the teasing smile playing on his face as he placed his hand over his heart, there was an inside joke Jared didn’t know. “I think I just fell in love with you.”

The growl that came from Jared’s chest had both of them bursting into laughter that melted the tension like it was butter on a barbecue.

“Damn, Freckles,” Chris ruffled Jensen’s hair fondly. “I thought we weren’t going to tell Jay-Man about our illicit love affair?” Even knowing they were joking did nothing to quell the fire of jealousy that flared up in Jared’s chest.

“Fuck, Chris, I like you, but you better be joking,” he bit off. The other boy laughed and Jensen stepped forward tentatively to wrap his arms around Jared’s waist. He purred with pleasure at the contact, feeling like a part of him had been returned to him; as though not having Jensen in his arms was like taking away a vital organ… …like his heart.

This time, Jared noticed as Chris discreetly slipped away to give them some space. Leaning down, he trailed soft little nips and kisses all the way along Jen’s jaw, then down his neck, stopping to suck at the hollow at the base of his throat. Jensen shivered and ground lightly forward, Jared almost dropping from the pleasure that fogged his mind, not even fighting against the purrs that rumbled deep in his chest.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, Jensen Ackles,” Jared murmured into his mate’s hair. “I’ve been waiting my entire life for you, and nothing in the world will ever measure up to you. Nothing will ever mean as much, or be worth as much to me as you. You deserve more than the world, please let me give you that.” He pulled away and cupped Jensen’s cheek in one big palm. “You’re everything to me, Jen.”

“You’re even more to me, Jay,” Jensen admitted, looking down bashfully. “There’s only one thing I’d like to know now.” His mate looked up, a more playful sparkle in his eyes that Jared had missed fiercely.

“What’s that?” he asked, butting his nose against the top of Jensen’s jaw, a wolfish display of affection that he couldn’t withhold.

Jensen grinned mischievously. “How do you like your eggs?”

###

Chapter End Notes
Aww! Okay, on to The Date!!! See y'all soon!! ;-)
The Date

Chapter Notes

Drum roll please!! What you have all been waiting for!! Once again, thank you all so much for the amazing response. I am beyond humbled; you guys are epic, much love!!

Shout out to all the people who requested fluffy things, like cuddling and clothes sharing...I think I've encompassed everything you guys asked for, but I'm so terribly sorry if I haven't! Please let me know, and you'll see it next chapter!

Special shout-out to hiddenscribbles and Big Ben, who requested the cute gestures, and a very special shout-out to Catsss, who was kind enough to take the time to remind me to include cuddles and clothes sharing about three chapters ago. Finally, I'm giving you what you asked for! I love that you're invested enough to remind me, so thank you!

To all my loyal readers; I love you all. Kudos to you guys! ;-) I apologize in advance for the dirty talk, as I am terrible at it, but hope the almost-smut is enjoyed!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

While Jensen was frying the eggs, Jared decided to help set the table. It didn’t escape his attention, how domestic it felt, and it filled him with a sappy sense of satisfaction.

Approaching the table, he was greeted once more by the sight of all the books and papers strewn over the surface. Picking one up at random, he wondered what on earth his mate had been busy with.

The sight that met him took his breath away in a barely audible whoosh.

It was an oil painting in magnificent detail, depicting the sun rising high over a mountain crest. Barely discernible arcs of silver and yellow expertly giving the impression of rays of light were strewn tastefully over the snow-capped, jagged mountaintop. The sky was what caught his eye the most, it’s blend of colors and the slight smattering of stars that still lingered looking lifelike in its detail. Jared would have sworn it was a photo if not for the intricate little symbol at the right hand bottom corner; the letter J inordinately woven around an A.

“Jen, you drew this?” Jared breathed in awe. Jensen turned around, blushing when he saw what Jared was holding up.

“Yeah,” he nodded, looking chagrined. “They’re not very good, but it’s relaxing…”

“Are you kidding me?” Jared raised his eyebrows with a scoff. “This is brilliant, I can barely find the words…Jen, you’re an amazing artist!”

“Thanks,” he beamed at the praise, even as he inclined his head shyly. “I’m no expert, but I love
Jared thumbed through the pages; various pen and pencil sketches, oil paintings and a couple of coal drawings met his gaze, some of Jen’s trench-coated friend, some of nature, one with a phoenix rising from the ashes. The last one in the second book caught his eye the most.

It was an oil work of a beautiful, smiling woman; her hair flowed loose around her shoulders and she was sitting in a bed of flowers of the most exuberant colors. A testament to Jen’s skill, her eyes seemed to sparkle through the canvas and her curved lips made Jared feel that she was about to start laughing.

“Jen, who’s this?” Jared asked, feeling the weight of the question hang over him, even if he wasn’t entirely sure why.

Jensen glanced at him, flipping the last omelet on to a plate. His eyes filled with sadness and he unconsciously curled a little into himself, turning to brace his palms on the counter. Jared put the painting down carefully, coming to wrap his arms around Jensen’s waist from behind. He rested his chin on Jen’s shoulder, angling forward to press a chaste kiss to the sensitive spot beneath his ear.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” he added, squeezing him lightly.

“I know,” he nodded, turning his head to the side to rest it against the top of Jared’s head. “She was my foster mom,” he said finally. “She died in an accident when I was 8.”

“Oh, Jen, I’m sorry,” Jared murmured regretfully. “I shouldn’t have…”

“No,” Jensen shook his head, turning in Jared’s grasp to rest his hands over Jared’s chest. “I want you to know more about me. I know that I’m about as forthcoming as a mob boss with lockjaw sometimes, but I’m going to try.”

Jared felt a wave of emotion come over him, and he pressed his lips firmly to Jensen’s, taking his mate by surprise. Jen opened up easily for him when he flicked his tongue over his mate’s bottom lip, and Jared plundered his mouth, chasing the taste of his mate and running possessive hands over Jensen’s body that finally came to rest, one grasping his hips and the other slipping down to grope covetously at the sexy curve of his ass. Jensen rolled his hips forward, slipping one leg between Jared’s muscular thighs, making the Alpha groan and rock into him to get some friction to his increasingly hardening cock, a desperate mass of wantmine at the moment.

Jared manhandled him, pushing him against the counter and lifting him to perch on it’s edge. Jensen let out a small squeak that had Jared grinning against his mouth. Slipping his hand underneath Jensen’s sweatshirt, Jared fluttered his fingers softly over the smooth skin of the small of his mate’s back, delving teasingly over the top of his ass. Jensen arched with a mewl, and Jared bit back his instinctive groan.

“So fucking responsive…”

“Gah! Get a room, Jesus Christ,” Chris’ voice burst through their little bubble of heated desire, effectively cooling them both off. Jared grinned as Jensen’s cheeks burned a bright red; he pressed a teasing kiss to the pulse point in Jen’s throat and let him slide back down from the edge of the counter, enjoying how this essentially had his mate brushing down the length of his body.

“Technically, the kitchen is a room,” Jensen retorted tartly, and Jared had to smirk with pride at the way his mate could still spark back and fight, even in light of his chagrin. His Jen was feisty, and unlike most meat-headed Alphas, Jared would have it no other way. It was a part of Jensen that made him Jensen. Jared would never want him to lose that. “Besides,” Jensen threw a dish cloth at the chuckling alpha, “my house, Kane. I can kiss my boyfriend wherever I want. So there.” Jensen stuck his tongue out and cuddled into Jared’s side. Jared shook his head fondly, laughing freely at the
amused look on Chris’ face as he looped an arm around Jensen’s waist. He was disappointed at the lack of belt loops on the sweatpants, so he settled for hooking his thumb on the edge of Jensen’s pocket. If he minded the action, Jensen never showed it, and Jared enjoyed having that connection; it was a symbol to him, that he would never- _could never_- let his mate go.

Chris shook his head at Jensen, smiling softly, and Jared could see the other boy’s love clear as day in his eyes. Consciously reminding himself that Kane felt _brotherly_ love for Jensen, Jared still couldn’t help but loop his other arm around Jensen and press a light, possessive kiss to the top of his head, a show of ownership, maybe, but then, this was _his_ mate- Jared figured he was entitled to fend off any possible outside interest in the love of his life.

The paintings and drawings were scattered across the table, as Jared had left them, and he stiffened when he saw them catch the blue-eyed alpha’s attention. He wasn’t sure whether Jensen was willing to share his art yet, seeing as how he hadn’t told them about it all until then. Jen looked up when he felt Jared tense, and he turned to look at Chris. Surprisingly, he simply turned in Jared’s arms, relaxing against him with his back to Jared’s chest, and observed Chris looking at the artwork. Jared took his cue from Jensen, unwinding his tense stance and watching the moment that it dawned on Chris, that Jensen had been the one to do all that.

“Jesus Christ…” he mumbled, still looking through the drawings slowly and whistling appreciatively under his breath. “Fuck, Freckles, did you do all this?”

“Guilty,” Jensen nodded, biting his lower lip. “They’re just rough work, though…”

Jared tightened his arms around his mate, hating how much he underestimated such an awe-inspiring talent. Jared swore inwardly that he was going to rectify the wrongs that had been done to his gorgeous green-eyed soul mate, and that he was going to exact a special brand of avengement on whoever made Jensen doubt himself.

Justice _a la_ Jared.

And it was going to start with one Christian Kane if he continued to keep his trap shut and leave Jensen in suspense.

He narrowed his eyes at the other alpha, barely suppressing a warning growl. Chris continued to look at all the pieces, stopping; like Jared; at the painting of Jen’s mom. Seeming to sense the line Jared had toed over earlier, he simply laid the canvas delicately on the middle of the table, then turned to look straight at Jensen with a serious face.

“If this is your rough work, then you’re going to be a millionaire by 30 if you take the time, kid,” he stated frankly.

Jensen snorted, the relief in his laugh obvious as he pulled away from Jared’s arms to gather the canvases and pages. Jared felt the loss immediately, and he rebelled against his human urge to pout and his wolfish urge to howl. Jensen cleared the table, arguing with Chris all the while about whether his paintings were good or not. Jared stepped back from their friendly, brotherly bantering moment, and made use of the distraction to really look at Jensen.

His movements were stilted from the beating he took yesterday, and Jared still wondered who the mystery person was that had whaled on his beautiful mate. He had the faintest whiff of a scent, not enough to follow, but that wasn’t something he could address right now. He forced himself to think on the other things; the graceful efficiency that Jen operated with. The easy smile that quirked his full lips upwards far too seldom than it should be. The way his broad shoulders were, for once, relaxed, and the way the crinkle in the middle of his forehead seemed lost in the smooth, worry-line free face
that Jared could swear had been imprinted directly on his soul.

Jensen threw his head back at that precise moment and laughed loud, a belly-deep, rumbling sound that stole Jared’s next heartbeat, and right then and there, Jared knew what the most beautiful part of his Jensen was.

As though he could sense his gaze and thoughts, Jensen turned around, green pools of warmth searching Jared out, full lips breaking into a full-on smile as his gaze came to rest on him. It lit Jared up from the inside, and in that single moment?

Everything was right in Jared’s world.

###

“He’s hurt bad, Jared.”

Chris’ voice penetrated Jared’s happy fog, effectively busting his good vibes as Jensen’s bruises came to mind. The awful picture of him on the floor, bloody and beaten, sprang to the back of his eyelids and he swallowed convulsively.

“I know, man,” Jared answered with a world-weary sigh. Anger twisted his gut, and he clenched and unclenched his fists, the repetitive action speaking volumes about his frustration. “But I don’t know what to do if he won’t talk to me.”

“He’s tight-lipped with me too,” Chris huffed, kicking angrily at the sidewalk as they walked to their houses. ”We can’t push him though, or he’ll never open up.”

“I don’t want to push,” Jared agreed softly, thinking about Jensen’s confession when they spoke that morning.

I want you to know more about me. I know that I’m about as forthcoming as a mob boss with lockjaw sometimes, but I’m going to try.

He was getting further with Jen than he’d thought possible at the beginning of all of this. It meant so much more that Jared hadn’t had to probe and poke and Spanish Inquisition him; Jensen had come to him, he wanted to share with Jared without any prompting and that felt to Jared like a priceless gift. The gift of immense and astounding trust, given to him when he’d least deserved it, making it all the more precious.

How could he possibly belittle such a gift by goading Jen into talking to him? It would only push the other boy away…Jared would just have to trust his mate to come to him on his own.

“What happens if, in some inherently-Jensen, self-sacrificing move, he doesn’t come to you?” Chris asked in disbelief, when Jared spoke his intention.

“I have to trust him,” Jared repeated grimly. “I’ve been trying so hard to get him to turn to me, to rely on me, without any sort of reciprocation. Maybe the best way to get him to trust me, is to start by trusting him.”

Chris was quiet for a moment, before he nodded. “That’s a pretty good point, Padalecki. I don’t like our odds, but I guess there isn’t really a better plan at the moment.”

“Nope,” Jared agreed somberly. Thinking of Jensen’s laugh, his spirit lifted slightly. “What I can do, is show him one hell of a first date tonight.”
“You need help with that plan, Romeo?” Chris asked with a teasing grin, and while Jared was amazed at the yards their something-resembling-friendship had taken, he was also grateful for it. All because of Jen, somehow, he was sure.

“No,” he laughed, declining the offer. “I think it’s best you and me don’t make plans for a little while,” he grinned ruefully. “Besides…I got this one.”

~*Jensen*~

Jensen took his time cleaning the house and erasing all traces of his overnight guests. Eric had phoned earlier, simply barking out a slurred announcement that he was going to be gone the rest of the weekend, and Jensen was glad for the reprieve.

He had just had another, very relaxing bath, when he remembered that he was supposed to have a date with Jared tonight. Was it still on, despite their little fight? Or was there a making-up period before they could go on a date?

His gut told him to be ready, because knowing Jared, he wouldn’t allow a silly thing like social norm postpone a date he’d been working towards for weeks.

Feeling so much better after his scalding hot soak in the tub, Jensen felt something creep up on him that he hadn’t felt in long, long years.

Excitement.

It pounded a jagged rhythm in his heart, butterflies assaulting his stomach and a ridiculous grin playing on his lips. Nervous energy came off him in waves, and for once, he embraced it. He had never felt this way about Adam; maybe a little jittery, sure, but never completely wrecked, can’t-stop-smiling, white hot energized!

After succumbing to the stereotype and trying on four different outfits, he decided on the one he thought was the best of the worst. Jensen felt subconscious in his dark, faded jeans (with the artful rips he’d made after ripping one hole by accident) paired with the green V-neck that clung tightly to his upper body for how small it was becoming. He scuffed the toes of his old sneakers against the floor, biting his lip unconsciously as he debated whether he looked fine or not.

Before he could decide to change into something else, there was an almost ominous knock on the front door. His heart leaped into his throat, and a wide smile broke over his face. It was as though all the blood in his arms concentrated in his neck, as a flush crept up his throat and his palms got clammy.

Either this is normal for a first date, which means I did the first date wrong with Adam, or I’m dying, which would really be just my luck, he thought ruefully, a giggle bordering on hysterical bubbling in his throat. Taking a few cleansing breaths, he finally mustered the courage to open the door.

Those little breathing exercises? Completely and utter pointless considering the fact that Jared looked nothing short of breathtaking. Dressed in dark navy jeans that were tea-stained on the thighs, and a navy hoodie jacket over a grey button-down hanging untucked, Jared left his mouth dry and his throat working convulsively as he tried to breathe and find the words to tell Jared how amazing he looked. Jared’s own words stopped in his throat as he looked at Jensen, and the bright smile froze, a look of wonderment and awe slipping into darkening hazel orbs as they stood for a minute just drinking each other in. If Jensen didn’t know any better, he’d have said that Jared was as stunned
speechless by his appearance as he was by Jared’s…but that wasn’t possible. He looked downright scruffy next to the taller boy.

“You look absolutely gorgeous, Jen,” Jared finally managed to get out, a smile twisting his lips as Jensen looked confused. “You got plans tonight, hot stuff?”

Jensen blushed and grinned bashfully, nerves wreaking havoc on his insides. “Yeah,” he cleared his throat in an attempt to sound normal. “Yeah, I have plans.”

Jared’s face crumpled in temporary confusion. Forehead and nose scrunched in the most adorable way, he cocked his head to the side and aimed wide eyes at Jensen. “Plans with me, right?” he clarified. “You don’t have plans with anyone else? We were just joking around?”

And just like that, all of Jensen’s nerves and shyness was gone. He let out a body-shaking laugh and Jared grinned softly at him. “Yeah, Jay,” he nodded, still chuckling. “Plans with you.”

“Good,” Jared bobbed his head up and down happily. “It would have been a little awkward otherwise.”

Jared stepped towards Jensen, pulling him into his arms. He relaxed in the strong warmth Jared always offered, sighing contentedly when his boyfriend butted the bottom line of his jaw softly with his nose, and Jared nuzzled into the side of his neck when he tilted his head up in an almost submissive gesture.

“You really do look stunning sweetheart,” Jared breathed, trailing kisses up to his ear before biting the lobe softly and sucking it into his mouth. Jensen panted at the sensation and instinctively rocked into Jared, bunching the material of his shirt in clenched fists. Jared trapped his ear between his teeth and grazed it as he pulled away, just bordering on a sting of pain. Jensen’s breath was already ragged and he tried desperately to pull in a lungful of air.

“You’re not looking so bad yourself, Jay.” His voice was rough and almost unrecognizable as it was saturated with desire. He grinned, a moment of confidence coming over him. “As Misha would say, you look like sex on legs.” He punctuated his statement with a teasing little roll of his hips that had Jared biting down on his neck. Jensen let out a strangled gasp as Jared sucked unforgivingly on the spot, forgetting any intention they had of going out in favor of being pressed against every last inch of Jared’s hard, toned body.

“You carry on like that, with that deep rough voice and those sexy little teases, then we aren’t going to leave your house tonight,” Jared promised in a dark murmur that was so full of desire that Jen automatically shivered.

“You say that like it’s supposed to be a threat instead of a promise,” he answered without thinking, “I would have no problem being housebound.”

“Bound…” Jared smirked saucily. “Now there’s an idea worth exploring,” he winked lecherously and Jensen moaned at the implication.

“Now who’s teasing?” He couldn’t help the pout that spread over his face. Jared laughed throatily and seemed to force himself a few steps back.

“The whole point of the J.A.W Initiative was to woo you, Jen,” he grinned. “I didn’t get into so much trouble, just to back out at the first date. And I planned the whole thing with no help from Chris, so I’m really anxious to see whether I was being too presumptuous when I turned down the help.”
“Your wish, my command,” Jensen winked, a responding flush of desire painting his chest and neck red as Jared’s eyes darkened at the inflection. Jensen made a mental note to explore this little kink of Jared’s as he grabbed his keys and ran a hand through his hair. “Let’s go.”

It was almost amusing, and it was definitely adorable how quickly the change came over Jared. He went from a lusty, hungry guy ready to shove him against the nearest wall, to the over-excited, gentle giant that somewhat resembled a puppy. Taking his hand gently, Jared led him to the truck and even went so far as to open his door for him.

Jensen put the back of his hand to his forehead, fluttering his lashes dramatically. “Chivalry is not dead,” he proclaimed, smirking at Jared’s antics. The taller boy barked a loud laugh, blushing lightly.

“Shut up, I’m nervous,” he defended as he hopped in on the driver’s side, brown eyes sparkling.

“Don’t be,” Jensen smiled warmly. “It’s just me.”

Jared leaned over the console and caught Jensen’s lips in a searing kiss that made his head spin. “When are you ever going to learn,” he asked softly, breath wafting temptingly over Jen’s face, “that you’re never just anything?”

Jensen didn’t answer, but in a show of boldness that he wouldn’t have associated with himself a few weeks ago, he leaned up and kissed the side of Jared’s neck, just below his strong jaw. Jared smiled at him, the soft and enamored look telling him that it didn’t escape Jared’s attention that it was the first time Jensen had been the one to initiate a kiss. Jared grabbed his hand after reversing out of the driveway. The tall, hazel-eyed boy kept their interlinked hands resting lightly on his upper thigh, his thumb rubbing gentle circles on Jensen’s palm.

“Where are we going?” Jensen asked as Jared took the turn-off that took them out of town. Jared smiled mysteriously and brought the hand he was holding to his mouth to pepper small kisses over Jen’s knuckles. Jensen thought it was a pretty good compensation for not telling him where they were going.

When they finally did pull up, it was next to the mouth of the forestry on the edge of town, not the same place that Jensen had found Jared before, but around the same district.

“If you brought me here to make out, we could have done that at my house,” Jensen teased with a grin.

Jared rubbed the back of his neck, a tell-tale sign that nerves were taking hold once more. Jensen reached out and fondly pushed a lock of his hair behind his ear, following the path until he was tugging lightly on the ends of Jared’s hair. He leaned into the touch, and Jensen made another mental reminder that Jared loved it when Jensen petted his hair.

“I’m going to love whatever we’re doing, because I’m doing it with you,” Jensen reassured him softly, flushing at the raw truth in his words.

But it was definitely worth it for the dazzling smile that lit up Jared’s face as he held Jensen’s hand where it was and leaned in to steal a kiss.

“We’re going for a picnic, in my favorite place in the whole world,” Jared told him when they broke apart. “I haven’t showed this place to anyone before, I wanted to share it with you.”

Jensen’s heart squeezed with- he had to admit it now- love. What else could it be with this gentle, loving, caring, amazing boy?
Wordlessly, Jared took a picnic basket- and yes, he’d actually found a picnic basket for it- from the back and they headed on to a pathway. It thinned out as they walked and Jensen understood why nobody else would have gone this far in; it hardly seemed like a trail anymore, but his trust in Jared won out over his doubts.

It was already approaching 6.05pm when they finally stepped out of the woodsy landscape and smack into a wide, open clearing, picturesque in its beauty. The odd crop of flowers brightened the meadow that was still bathed in the last dredges of sunshine. It was warm, for the time was close to dusk, but not chilly yet; the perfect blend to appreciate the beauty of the secluded place without burning from the heat. Jensen couldn’t find his voice, but thankfully, Jared had seen his speechlessness for what it was- awe.

“I know,” he murmured happily. “You like it?”

“I love this,” Jensen whispered, terrified that speaking too loud would somehow shatter the illusion and everything would turn to ash. This place seemed to stunning to be real.

“Beautiful,” he murmured reverently, as Jared came to his side, his gaze on Jensen instead of the view.

“Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Jared murmured, not taking his eyes off Jensen, and good Lord wasn’t that cheesy? But good Lord, didn’t it work?

His insides melted and he turned into Jared, kissing the hollow at the base of his throat. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“I was going to take you to some fancy restaurant, but I figured you could appreciate this place as much as I do.”

Jensen smiled into his boyfriend’s chest. He remembered with stunning clarity one of the first few doubts he’d had about the J.A.W. Initiative- what of me does Jared really even know?- and immediately, his doubts vanished. Jared knew him; he was right in saying that he hadn’t really needed Chris’ help.

“You figured perfectly,” Jensen told him, tilting his head up for a kiss and enjoying the happy excitement that the small gesture brought to his boyfriend. “You know me better than I thought, Padalecki.”

Jared grinned widely, looping his arms around Jensen and playing with the hem of his t-shirt. “I’m really glad to hear you say so, Jen.”

They stood for a while, basking in the closeness and this newfound level they’d ascended to. Jensen was all for luxuriating in the moment, but Jared suddenly straightened, back rigid and eyes wide as he looked down at Jensen.

“What?” he asked in alarm, muscles tensing in the same way it always would before a beating.

“Jen!” Jared exclaimed, bouncing a little on his feet, looking every bit the eager puppy. “We just had our first fight!”

Jensen threw his head back with a loud laugh; he’d probably laughed more in the past day than he had in…months?

No. Years.
A mischievous sparkle entered his eyes as he mustered up the courage for what he was about to do; something he’d wanted to do since day one.

Hooking two fingers of each hand on either side of Jared’s belt loops, he used all the power he had to yank Jared against him, their hips pressed flush together, and claim his mouth in a deep, wet, dirty kiss. It didn’t take long before Jared took control of the kiss, which suited Jensen just fine as Jared wrapped one long arm around his waist, holding him there, and the other brought up to cup his jaw. Steeling his nerves one more time, Jensen rocked forward and ground his hardening cock demandingly against Jared’s, rocking relentlessly and moaning loudly into their messy kiss.

Before Jensen could react, he found himself spun quickly around and pulled back, the hard bulge in front of Jared’s jeans pressing in God, the most amazing way against the curve of his ass. Jared moved his hands, bringing one up to gently angle his head up, so Jared could have access to his neck, and the other roughly palming him through the coarse fabric of his jeans. The contrast between the gentle hand and nips and suckling on his neck, and the rough hand palming his jean covered crotch was almost too much to take as Jensen whimpered, a needy sound from the back of his throat. “You’re a fucking tease, Jen,” Jared growled, slowing his movements torturously. “I bet you wouldn’t mind if I pushed you up against the tree and fucked you hard and fast? In fact, you’ll probably love it, won’t you Jen?”

The image popped into Jensen’s mind, driving him almost mad with lust. “Fuck, yes…” he moaned grinding forwards and backwards, unsure which ministrations he was enjoying more. “Stop!” Jared groaned into his ear, his voice completely wrecked. “You gotta stop, Jen, or I really am going to fuck you into the tree, right here right now.”

“No, we can’t.” Jared panted, forcibly pushing himself away. The sharp and unforgiving sting of rejection bit deep into Jensen, and it was as effective as a cold shower. How had he misread the situation so badly?

“Jen, no,” Jared spoke quickly, gathering him into his arms and holding him tightly against his chest. Jensen placed his hands hesitantly on Jared’s chest, feeling like a scolded kid. “No, sweetheart,” Jared’s whisper was hot on his neck as Jared wrapped himself around Jensen’s body. “Our first time together is not going to be like this, on the spur of the moment. It’s not going to be on the first date, in the middle of a forest, against a tree that’s going to scrape up your back. You’re too important to me, for me not to do this properly.”

Jensen relaxed with each word, feeling treasured in Jared’s arms, something he hadn’t felt since the last moments before his foster mom had died. Jared was peppering his face with kisses and he nuzzled the side of Jen’s neck, butting against him softly with his nose to get him to look up. He pressed their foreheads together and Jensen felt, more than heard, their breathing sync up. When Jared spoke, his lips brushed teasingly and just barely over Jensen’s.

“Not like this, but definitely soon,” he promised in a low whisper, lowering one of his hands to rest possessively over the top of Jensen’s ass. Jensen sighed happily and nodded, his forehead slipping down. Jared lifted his head up with the motion and Jensen allowed his head to drop on to Jared’s chest. Jared lowered his face, effectively tucking Jensen under his chin, and they stayed like that for a while.
“Jay?” Jensen whispered.

“Mm?”

“We had our first fight, and our first make-up kiss,” he smirked devilishly, trying to reclaim the moment. Jared laughed, kissing the top of his head fondly.

“If that was the make-up kiss, then fuck, Jen, I can’t wait for the make-up sex.”

Laying out the blanket Jared had brought, they had eaten their meal and were now looking up at the sun setting, and Jensen wanted nothing more than to sketch the beautiful view it produced. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind before a sketch pad was dangled in front of him.

“I figured you’d want to sketch the view,” Jared grinned. “And if I’m honest, I kind of want to see you work.”

If his life had depended on it, Jensen couldn’t have spoken a single word.

Kissing Jared deeply, he accepted the new sketch pad and proffered pencil, and immediately began sketching furiously. He drew it from their vantage point, drawing the edges of the checkered blanket and only their feet propped next to each other. He drew the grass and flowers around them, then finally, the tall trees in front of them, and above that, the sun setting.

“I love drawing the sun setting and rising, as you can see,” he mumbled while he worked, finding himself wanting to explain his quirk to his boyfriend. “I love it, because it shows a lot into the mindset of the person who looks at it. I almost always draw it so that you can’t tell whether the sun is setting or rising, and I love to find out what people see when they look at it; whether they see a sun rising, and their lives at a new beginning, or if they see a sun setting, and something coming to a close in their life.”

Jared didn’t answer, but Jensen knew it was more because he didn’t want to interrupt Jensen’s drawing zone. He was vaguely aware that it was getting steadily darker, and Jared had moved away from him for a moment, and after a beat, soft light surrounded them. Still, he didn’t pick his head up, and Jared simply sat at his back, one arm slung around him, content to just watch. By the time he had finished the sketching and shading, it was dark, and in a moment of inspiration brought on by gratitude at Jared’s patience, he sketched a quick, big star to the right of the setting sun, using line inflections to emphasize how brightly it was shining, even in the light of dusk.

“There was no star, Jen,” Jared spoke for the first time, a low contradiction.

“I know,” Jensen replied passively, beginning to outline initials inside the star. “This is my star. It’s the Jay-Star. No matter where I am or what time it is, I always know it’s there.” He couldn’t bring himself to care for how clichéd he might have been being, because he meant every last word of it. “Bright and stunning and always there.”

With that, Jensen finished off the letters: J-A-Y.

Handing it to him, Jensen finally looked up, and the sight took his breath away. Draped around the trees were soft fairy lights, hundreds of them, making the meadow look all the more magical. He sat up, kneeling on his knees. How could he have missed this? It was so romantic and perfect, and he’d just carried on drawing!

He turned to face Jared, ready to apologize profusely and thank him endlessly for everything he was…but not for the first time, Jensen lost his words in his throat. Jared was still sitting in the same position, still looking at the sketch, still unmoving. He felt uncertainty rear its ugly head, and he bit
“I’m going to make it into an oil, it’ll look better then,” he promised tentatively. “It’s just a rough pencil sketch at the moment, but…”

Jensen’s voice was cut off by his muted intake of breath as Jared looked up at him, showing him the unshed tears glistening in his hazel eyes, the shiny sheen a mockery of the spark that usually twinkled there. “Jay?” Jensen breathed, making the address more of a question while he tried to hold himself together. Seeing Jared on the verge of crying had him almost coming undone.

“The Jay-Star,” Jared murmured in a rough, choked voice, thick with potent emotions. Jensen’s chest suddenly felt like it had caught alight in the most spectacular way, and unbidden, his eyes began to burn with sensation of crying.

“Yeah,” he whispered back, loathe to intrude on the intimacy of their moment by speaking even a little louder. “The Jay-Star.”

Without warning, Jensen found himself yanked forward and crushed to Jared. In a swift motion, Jared flipped them over so that he was draped over Jensen. Jared dipped his head so that their foreheads were pressed together and their lips were inches apart.


He closed the space between them with the softest, most tender kiss Jensen had ever experienced. Softly caressing, his lips and tongue traced and mapped every inch of Jensen’s mouth, while his hand ever so gently worked at his jaw, one thumb running reverent circles that coaxed Jensen into allowing him to delve in deeper. The kiss was soft and unhurried, not nearly as hungry as desperate as all their other kisses, but the inferno ignited between them just seemed all the more powerful; a slow-burning blaze in place of a spontaneous combustion. Jen was content to let his boyfriend take control, and Jared kept up the languid pace that only seemed to ratchet up the heat between them.

I love you, Jensen thought, excited for the day he could finally muster up the courage and strength to say so. I love you so damn much, Jared Padalecki.

~*Jared*~

“…and then she kind of just turned around, and told him that I had the talent and drive and support to become the next Picasso if I wanted, and that Math was not going to make or break my life. She always had my back, even if my biggest problem was second-grade math,” Jensen chuckled lightly.

“Sometimes makes me grateful she never had to have my back with some of the stuff I face now.”

Jen was finally opening up to him about his foster mom, Jody, and he got the distinct impression that his mate wasn’t talking about facing the Math they had to learn now. They were sprawled on the blanket, staring at the stars with Jen tucked snugly into Jared’s side. Jared’s arms were wrapped tightly around his mate and Jensen had fisted Jared’s shirt in his hands. They’d been cuddled together for a long time, just talking, not wanting to stop after Jensen revealed that he had no curfew because his foster dad was out of town for the night, and Jared had phoned his parents to tell them he’d be staying late at Chad’s and crashing there.

The smallest of shivers ran down the length of Jensen’s body and pressed so tightly together, Jared couldn’t help but feel it. He felt vaguely triumphant as he sat up with Jen and began to pull off the
hoodie he’d worn; he had deliberately worn it so that he could give it to Jen, not wanting to know whose sweatshirt his mate had been wearing that morning, just wanting Jen to wear his from now on. He firmly, but tenderly put the hoodie on for Jensen; it was so big that it hung off Jensen, drowning him.

Jared knew he wanted Jen to wear his jacket instead of whoever’s jacket it was this morning, but damn, he could never have foreseen what a fucking turn-on it was. Not only did it highlight how small Jensen was compared to his bulky frame, but it also made his mate smell like him, and God it was the most amazing thing in the world. If he’d had a say in it, he’d never want to see Jen in anything but his clothes ever again.

They relaxed back into their original positions, and Jensen yawned into the sleeve of Jared’s hoodie. Jared knew his mate had probably gotten little to no sleep the night before, in pain and worrying about him, so it was endearing to watch him fight the battle with sleep. The overwhelming want to take care and protect Jensen flooded him, and Jared tightened his grip around his mate, who turned his head unthinkingly and snuggled deep into the crook between Jared’s arm and chest. It provided a firm modicum of comfort, having Jensen tucked under his arm, because Jared felt for the first time like he could protect the love of his life from everything if he could just keep him there.

“My wolf is rubbing off on you, Jen,” Jared thought in amusement.

“I’m sleepy,” Jensen mumbled around another yawn as he pushed himself even closer to Jared, who grinned at the realization that he was now dealing with a semi-conscious mate. “You’re warm,” he added as an afterthought, and Jared chuckled. “You’ll be my blanket.”

“Yeah, sweetheart, I can be your blanket,” he whispered fondly, bringing his other arm to wrap around Jensen, who promptly nuzzled his head contentedly into Jared’s chest. My wolf is rubbing off on you, Jen, Jared thought in amusement.

“Night, Jay,” Jen sighed happily, his body becoming lax in Jared’s arms.

Jared chuckled, figuring that the rest of their epic first date could wait until they woke up. “Night, Baby. Sweet dreams.”

Jared was met by soft and even breathing and he looked down to see Jensen out cold, snuggled deep into his hoodie and chest. His face was free of the tension it usually carried, making him look years younger, and the implicit display of trust was almost more than Jared could take.

As tears formed in the corners of his eyes, Jared thought one more time about the Jay-Star, and what he had almost said, but hadn’t had the courage to complete.

He shifted them so that he could lay his head on top of Jensen’s, tangling their legs so that he was wrapped around his mate in a most protective, but loving embrace. As he began to drift off to sleep, his thoughts were on the words he was so close to saying, for how much it was written in his heart and soul.

I love you. I love you so damn much, Jensen Ackles.

###

Chapter End Notes

The date may continue a little bit in the next chapter! I hope you guys enjoyed it!
The Jay-Star: Jared's introspection

Chapter Notes

I know I'm a few hours late, but HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAYS, PEOPLE! And looking at the banner on top of my screen, HAPPY INTERNATIONAL FANWORKS DAY, too!!! Will y'all be my valentines? ;-) <3

Seriously though, I need to thank each and every one of you who have commented, clicked on that Kudos button, and all those silently reading along. I am so overwhelmed every time I get such a positive response from you, it never fails to humble me to my core. I feel so honored, and none of this story would be what it is if not for all of you, my wonderful readers. You guys kick some serious ass! Thank you all so much. Feel that little tendril of warmth? That's me sending all of you virtual hugs.

So here's some smut, seeing as how I was thrilled at your responses to the last chapter. I hope it's okay! XD Still nervous about it! Also some introspection on Jared's part...see what's going on in that wofly noggin of his!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

When Jared awoke, it was to the most stunning sight of the first rays of the morning sun basking over the meadow. The only sight more beautiful, was when he looked down to see his breath-taking mate still snuggled deep into him, still sound asleep. He nudged Jensen's face affectionately with his nose, tightening his grip around the smaller boy and breaking up his gentle nose-butting with soft, loving kisses. Sleep-softened, Jensen stirred, and hid his face in Jared's chest.

"Don' wanna ge'up," he mumbled, reaching around and grabbing Jared’s t-shirt in a vice grip. "Go back’a sleep."

"Wakey, wakey, Jen," Jared chuckled softly, a teasing lilt to his voice as he reached a hand up to push his mate's hair away from his face. "The sight is gorgeous."

"I'ave a perfectly fine sight right where I'em," Jensen grumbled, burrowing his face into Jared’s chest to make his point. Jared chuckled warmly, grinning fondly when Jen’s breathing evened out once more. He resigned himself to drinking in the wonderful sight of his mate, and enjoying the peace and serenity that their Jen&Jay bubble offered him while doing some real soul introspection.

Jared could definitely think of worse ways to spend his morning.

The first thing Jared could think of was the Jay-Star; even now, threatening tears still teased the back of his eyes. He had been caught unawares, and like an anvil descending, Jen just had to go and bring Jared to his proverbial knees with a quick, simple sketch and a few quiet words spoken so casually that it seemed the action had come naturally, instinctively to Jen. He had felt so overwhelmed, never
expecting to be given such a great and precious gift by his mate, not feeling even close to deserving of all it meant.

*This is my star. It’s the Jay-Star. No matter where I am or what time it is, I always know it’s there. Bright, and stunning, and always there.*

He could hear the underlying message in Jen’s words; the projection of his mate’s gratitude that he was there, and the overwhelming feelings that Jen didn’t yet know how to put a name to. If only he could explain the mating concept…

…which took Jared’s thoughts once more to deeply buried secrets.

He was lying to his mate. No matter how he chose to spin it, no matter how much he told himself we was protecting Jen, it didn’t change the fact that he was lying, one thing he knew would hit Jensen the hardest because trust was a huge part of their relationship. What scared Jared the most, was the thought of losing the trust he’d built through the fault of his own cowardice. He knew that losing that trust, would also mean losing Jensen, and that was a thought that could almost cripple him with devastation and grief. There was nothing in the world, no torture or any obscene amount of pain that could compare to that level of agony.

The only thing that came close to that fear, was the fear of actually telling him the truth. What if he freaked out? Called him a monster, and never wanted to see him again? It would be a moral dilemma of epic proportions, because on the one hand, he wanted to always do what was best for Jen, and he wanted to always heed his every wish, no matter whether it hurt him or not. On the other side of the coin, it would shatter him to ever leave the love of his existence. It would break him in ways that nothing else ever could to see him with another man’s arms around him, kissing him, hugging him, holding him tight, sharing a home, a bed…

Jared was breaking into a sweat at the very thought of it, his blood pumping furiously as his body heated with the force of his fury. He couldn’t even stand the thought of anyone touching what was his. He hadn’t even realized that he’d tightened his grip on Jen until the boy stirred restlessly in his vice-tight grip. He loosened his hold, made a few low, soothing sounds, and Jen snuggled into him once more, nuzzling his nose into the crook of Jared’s neck, and falling back to sleep.

Jared’s heart constricted with blazing love and he knew what his heart had already confirmed. He could not live without his Jensen. And that begged quite a fine question… What if he ran? Ran, and never looked back?

More to the point, wouldn’t he be entitled to? He would have every right in the world to run, because it was Jared’s fault for not being upfront with him to begin with, and how could he drop such a life-changing bomb on Jen and expect him to react calmly? Laugh it off with a slap to his shoulder and an affectionate kiss? Tell him it didn’t matter that they weren’t both the same? That they weren’t both human?

Jen was being amazing with learning how to share his life with Jared more and more, and he was returning the favor by hiding a whole world from his mate. His whole world, because his wolf was in his blood, it was an integral part of who he was. And what did that say about him, that he was still hiding it?

He had spent countless nights since meeting Jensen, wondering how he could possibly get by without mentioning the Were packs to him. He thought about just avoiding it all, but then the thought of never being intimate with Jen was enough to drive him crazy (and make him need to jack off, just on principle) and besides, his parents would never be okay with that option. Then he thought about telling Jen about it figuratively, and gauging his reaction, but then he got to thinking about whether
knowing without Jen knowing that he knew, was worse, or better than not telling him about any of it...and it was around that point that he’d confused himself terribly, and had to stop to take a drink of water and regroup. His last option had been to just leave. Just take Jen away, be happy with him the rest of their lives, sans packs and Weres and Alpha heirs. The option had held its fair amount of allure, but he could never turn his back on his family, on his pack. Not for his own benefit. He couldn’t just suppress his wolf, and quite honestly, he didn’t want to lie to Jen their whole lives. What kind of a relationship would that be? And he had to be considerate of Jen and Chris’ relationship as well. Both of them had found a certain sort of brotherhood in one another that Jared wasn’t sure he would ever understand, and he didn’t think he was meant to. Regardless, he could never take Jensen away from Chris, and vice versa. It would have been great if they could just play the Legendary-lovers-eloping scene, but he neither had the heart to do it to his mate, nor did he entertain the thought of being able to do it himself.

Which brought him back to square one.

How much longer could he keep up his litany of lies? It wasn’t fair to either of them, most especially to Jen. He had been hurt enough in his life.

But, by who?

All of the scars he’d mentally catalogued on his boyfriend’s body painted the back of his eyelids. He couldn’t stand the fact that he still didn’t know the cause of them all, and it struck him hard that it was an ongoing thing. Who would dare to lay a single finger on the mate of the future Alpha? It meant that it had to be a wolf from their rival pack, or an ignorant human, and that lessened his suspect pool to about 30% of the population. He was not above single-handedly interrogating said 30%, but he was determined to let Jensen come to him of his own volition. He got the feeling that Jen had little to no control normally, and the last thing he wanted was to be another Adam.

Who, now that he was thinking about him, Jared was going to tear limb from limb, enjoying each snap of his bones and subsequent scream of pain in a most sadistic way.

He couldn’t believe anyone would treat someone as rare and precious and amazing as Jen, the way Adam had. The jackass had abused him, and that wasn’t something Jared was sure he could overlook. Every day, he fought his instincts to hunt the bastard down, and he was sure his will was wearing thin.

Jensen’s insecurities made so much more sense once Jared knew about Adam. The son of a bitch had completely wrecked his self-image, and it never failed to baffle Jared just how much of himself Jensen didn’t see.

“You’re more treasured to me than the infinite riches of royalties,” he murmured to Jensen’s sleeping form, feeling an overwhelming need to let his mate know he was loved, even if he couldn’t really say the words.

Like he was attuned to Jared’s voice, Jensen’s eyes blinked blearily open, tightening the hand still gripping Jared’s shirt.

“Time to go?” he asked in a small voice. Jared smiled indulgently, pushing back his boyfriend’s hair and refraining from answering. If Jen wanted to sleep more, Jared was more than happy to oblige. Jen pouted and nodded, mumbling something into Jared’s shirt that sounded suspiciously like acquiescence.

As Jensen rubbed his eyes and stretched out, Jared’s hormones came back to life. He pushed back the fervent desire to run his tongue along every ridge and crevice in sight, saving that particular
fantasy for a day when he had whipped cream in his arsenal too. *Mmm…*

“I’m sorry I fell asleep on you and didn’t want to watch the sunset with you,” Jensen apologized, his voice rueful and still thick with sleep. “You brought me to your favorite place in the world and I chose to sleep.” Jared bristled, and was immediately about to respond to the unwarranted self-disgust in his mate’s voice, when it hit him.

And Jared couldn’t believe he hadn’t figured this out earlier, and said so.

It was Jensen slipping out of his arms and standing up that shook Jared from his inactivity.

“Jen?” at Jared’s muted address, his mate turned to face him, eyes wide with question. “You know how I told you I was bringing you to my favorite place in the whole world?” Jensen nodded the affirmative, wheeling his hand in the air in a gesture that told him to carry on. “I have a new favorite place in the world,” he announced with a small smile, his heart feeling warm even as he wondered why it took him this long to realize what his heart had known all along.

“Do tell,” Jen invited with a grin, raising an eyebrow inquisitively.

“My favorite place in the world is wherever you are, Jen,” Jared told his mate truthfully. “Right next to you? That’s where I always want to be…need to be. My favorite place is with you in my arms.”

He may have realized it late, but Jared had never spoken truer words in his life.

~*Jensen*~

Jen’s eyes widened at Jared’s quiet and earnest proclamation. He knew in his heart that Jared wasn’t feeding him a line, he wasn’t like that, and it flummoxed him, being treated the way Jared treated him.

His chest tightened, as though someone had reached into his chest and squeezed his heart. His breathing became sharp and choppy and if he wasn’t so shocked at the truth in Jared’s words, he was sure he would be crying.

Wordlessly, he sat back down and wrapped both his arms around Jared, nuzzling into his chest and closing his eyes in content. Jared’s chest rumbled against his cheek as his boyfriend made a low sound of approval that sounded almost like a purr. Jensen slipped one leg between Jared’s and the hazel-eyed boy immediately responded by curling a leg around it and resting his other foot against Jensen’s unoccupied ankle. Jared bent his head and rested his cheek on Jensen’s downturned head and Jen relished in the comforting feel of Jared’s breath against the back of his neck.

They didn’t speak for a few moments, and Jensen smiled in bemusement as he realized that they were wrapped around each other, unable to fit a paper between them, and it was terrific that there didn’t need to be anything sexual about it. Although he was eager to get to that part…

Before his raging hormones could betray him and ruin the quiet intimacy of the moment, Jen leaned his head up and angled his mouth to slot against Jared’s, in a vain attempt to stave off his desire to jump his boyfriend. They kissed slowly, languidly, tongues teasing and teeth nipping. Jensen snaked his arms around Jared’s neck and pulled himself up Jared’s body a little. The friction made Jared growl, and the sound shot a potent flare of desire right through Jensen’s body.

Well, he tried, at least.
Pulling himself up a little further, he untangled his legs from Jared’s and brought them upwards. Pushing against Jared, he maneuvered them so that he gently pushed Jared on to his back, then he draped himself over him, straddling him and still keeping them chest to chest.

He finally broke off the kiss to sit up, rolling his hips teasingly where he sat straddling Jared’s hips. His boyfriend growled, a deep and guttural sound at the back of his throat, as his hands shot up to grip almost bruisingly at Jensen’s hips. Using his hold, Jared pulled, urging Jensen into another hip roll that had both of them moaning loudly. Jensen slipped his hands under Jared’s shirt, running his fingers teasingly over the defined six-pack before brushing playfully softly and quickly over his nipples. Jared bucked upwards, grinding his hardening crotch into Jensen in response. Jensen mewedled and immediately redirected his attention to Jared’s jeans. He palmed Jared’s dick through his jeans and Jared almost came off the floor as he arched wildly. Before Jensen could comprehend the change, Jared flipped them with a power Jensen didn’t know he possessed, swopping their positions and straddling him with a grin.

“Always such a fucking tease,” Jared groaned lowly. “You see what you do to me?” Jared took his hand and pressed the palm back against his denim-clad erection, pushing into it and making Jensen moan like a porn star. “Why don’t I return the favor, baby?” he asked roughly, taking Jensen’s wrists in one hand and pinning them above his head. Holding them there, he relocated his other hand to the hard bulge in Jensen’s jeans. Jared rubbed his thumb teasingly over the damp spot where Jensen’s cock had leaked pre-come, before rubbing his big hand in wide circles while Jensen thrashed underneath him. It amazed him that Jared could still hold his wrists in place, but he didn’t question it for the pleasure overload he was experiencing at that moment.

In a quick motion, Jared divested him of his hoodie and rucked his shirt up to his chin and flicked open the button and zipper to Jensen’s jeans. Descending like a hawk swooping down on its prey, Jared attached his mouth to one nipple and sucked hard, reaching down at the same time to slip his giant hand into Jensen’s underwear and run a light touch around his cock, skin-on-skin for the first time.

“Jared!” Jensen screamed, bucking wildly into the touch, and his boyfriend ignored him in favor of flicking his tongue back and forth over Jensen’s painfully hard nipple. Jared lightly fisted his dick, and Jensen thought he was going mad from the pleasure since all he could manage to get out was a continuous whimper of his boyfriend’s name. “JayJayJayJay…”

“You taste so fucking good, Jen,” Jared growled roughly, the vibration sending a whole new sensation under Jensen’s skin. “I can’t wait to see what you taste like when I suck you down and make you come down my throat.”

And those words were his undoing.

“Jared!” he moaned again, reaching the edge of the cliff, right at his peak and ready to come just from Jared’s hand pumping his cock and his mouth playing with his nipples.

His boyfriend rubbed his thumb over the slit of his cock, spreading the pre-come before pumping his dick unrelentingly once more. “Come for me, Jen,” he commanded huskily. “Come for me, come on my hand baby.”

Who was Jensen to refuse?

With a strangled cry of his boyfriend’s name on his lips, he arched off the blanket completely and came harder than he ever remembered making himself come. Jared rubbed him through his orgasm, murmuring a soft cacophony of praises and telling him how fucking hot Jen looked coming undone for him.
When he finally descended from his high, he felt boneless and wonderfully sated. Jared let go of his wrists and framed his face with both hands, kissing him softly and sweetly.

“What about you?” Jensen asked, his voice a low drawl. Jared grinned mischievously.

“Believe me, Jen,” he winked, “watching you fall apart was enough to make me do the same.”

###

After they had mustered up the energy to get off each other, they’d driven to Jen’s house and used separate bathrooms to clean up. Now they were lying down together on the couch, watching The Titanic, Jensen’s back to Jared’s front, spooning lazily. Jensen was glad they hadn’t messed up Jared’s hoodie, because he loved wearing it. It almost felt like it was Jared’s personal claim on him, rather than just the sweet offer because Jen was cold. He felt like he was being wrapped up in Jared, and being able to huddle down into it and breathe in that smell that was just pure Jay, was a heaven Jen had been painfully unfamiliar with.

“Jay?” he turned his head a little to be able to look at Jared properly, pausing the movie to speak to his boyfriend. “You know, you haven’t really told me much about yourself.”

“Sure, you told me about that,” Jensen dismissed, “but not about you. What you’re like. I means, you know about my art, and my geek and stuff, but I highly doubt you’re just an amazing quarterback and a pretty face.” He leered at Jared, who chuckled fondly.

“You know, I think you’re the only one outside of Chad who thinks there’s more to me than the football player,” he said softly. Jensen heard the unspoken thanks, and he kissed the underside of Jared’s jaw in response, waiting for him to elaborate. “I like football,” Jared said, resting his chin on Jensen’s shoulder. “I also like other stuff. I like…” Jared blushed, piquing Jen’s interest.

“Tell me,” he urged gently. “Please?”

“Poetry,” Jared mumbled, turning his head into Jen’s neck. “I like poetry.”

“I know, I’m a cliché,” Jared muttered, starting to pull away. “I’m not any good either…”

“Don’t say that.” At the sharpness of Jensen’s words, Jared ceased his movements. Jensen turned himself around, careful not to fall as he faced his boyfriend. “I bet you’re amazing, just like you are at everything else. Recite one of your poems to me?”

“I don’t remember them,” Jared refuted uncomfortably.

“Liar. Tell me the one you wrote most recently.”

“I don’t remember them,” Jared refuted uncomfortably.

“Tell me the one you wrote most recently.”

For a long moment, they stared at each other, Jensen instinctively knowing to stay quiet and let Jared think. After several beats, Jared took a deep breath, and spoke in a barely audible murmur that was just for Jensen:

I count the hours, the minutes, the seconds
Until the moment I see your face.
Judging from the rapid thumpthump of my heart
My heart seems not to be keeping pace.

But I’ll rue destiny and I’ll defy the stars
So we can be together my love,
Listen for my signal; a howl at the moon
And the song of a pure white dove.

Wait for me, young love of my heart,
At the tip of the mountain’s crest
Two hearts will unify against the Fates
And two souls, finally together, will rest.

For a moment, Jensen couldn’t speak at all, for the massive lump that had taken residence in his throat. His eyes were wide where they were locked on Jared’s hazel orbs, which were steadily shining with self-doubt.

“It’s called Souls Together Will Rest,” Jared mumbled. “I wrote it three days ago. I know it’s not…”

“Don’t you dare tell me you don’t think it’s any good,” Jensen stopped him short. “That was the most amazing thing I’ve heard in a long, long time. That…Jesus, Jay, that gave me chills! I mean, I like Shel Silverstein as much as the next guy, but that was just…breath-taking. Jay, you’re…God, you’re amazing, you’re so damn talented!”

Jared looked lost for words. “You’re comparing me to Silverstein?” he asked in disbelief. “I’m nowhere near that level of…”

“You’re already there, Jay,” Jensen said resolutely. He pressed a chaste kiss against Jared’s lips. “That was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard. Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“You’re the best, Jen,” Jared mumbled, leaning down to capture his lips in another slow kiss.

Jensen still couldn’t get the poem out of his head. The emotions in them struck him deep; he felt the pain of the lovers’ forbidden passion and he felt the strength of their will to be together.

“It’s like drawing the sun setting and rising,” he mumbled unthinkingly.

“Jen?”

“You know how I told you that I like to see what people think when they see my works of the sun rising or setting, because it gives me perspective into them?” Jared nodded the affirmative. “Well, your poem is like that. The ending, I mean. Some people can see it as the lovers having died for their fight to be together, and so their two souls rest together. Or, they could see it more as two souls finding each other, and being at rest because they’re together, and no one really knows what happened to them thereafter.” He pondered his own insight, unable to deny the lack of pain and the influx of inner peace the ending had brought him. “I think I see them as the latter.”

“You’re amazing,” Jared chuckled lowly. “I gave it to Chad to read, and he thought the former, but you thought exactly what I was trying to capture of them. Their uncertain future for their soul-entwining love.” Jared’s eyes took on an expression Jensen couldn’t really put a name to. It seemed like he was worried, and scared, and at the same time, incredibly torn. He seemed desperate and edgy, even as he exuded ferocious calm.

“I think that people spend their whole lives looking for that kind of love,” Jensen said softly, feeling his heart squeeze in acknowledgment of the love he’d found in Jared. “So I think that come what may, their souls will always and forever rest together, no matter what complications the future brings.
“Yeah?” Jared’s eyes slowly lost some of its desperation, and though he wasn’t sure what he did to help, Jensen was glad he did something to remove that awful expression from his boyfriend’s normally sparkling eyes.

“Yeah, Jay.”

He pressed the play button, and the sounds of Jack and Rose’s voices streamed through the TV set. As he snuggled down into Jared’s arms, safe in his arms and wrapped in his hoodie, Jensen made a mental note to himself:

_Return Cas’ sweatshirt. Hide Jared’s in the closet._

###

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys liked it! Jared's poem was actually my own, original work...a little dabble in poetry...I was nervous about that too, so I hope you all liked Souls Together Will Rest!! For interest's sake, Jen's response, was pretty close to my friend's response when I sent the poem, so yeah!

Stay cool!

JayGirl
I believe in you and me

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for the outstanding feedback in the last chapter! You guys humble me and make me have a whole new appreciation for this forum!

Shout out to Claire, who is something of a new reader, and to everyone else who has just recently joined us! And to all my loyal readers who I always talk to in the comments, I love you all!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

“This day sucks out loud.”

Jensen didn’t even care that he was grumbling as he took a seat next to Misha in the bleachers. It was the last 10 minutes of lunch and he’d stayed in the library the whole time to finish a History report, and was starving to death just then. He took out his sandwich after greeting Gen and Danni, who were sitting in front of them. They returned the greeting and turned back to grin sympathetically at Jensen.

Chris and Jared weren’t in school. When Jen had asked, the gang had just mumbled some vague story about Jared’s older brother being in town for the day, and how Chris, Jared and this Jeff guy were pretty tight. Bottom line was that Jen’s Monday sucked out loud without his boyfriend and his best friend there.

“Cheer up, Jen, I’ll keep you company,” Misha waggled his eyebrows suggestively. Gen groaned and Danni smirked.

“It’s like you want Jared to kick your ass,” she remarked dryly. “And you know he will, so stop whatever it is you’re thinking and drink your juice, Meesh.” She turned to Jensen with an eye roll and a smile, ignoring Misha’s mumbled protests. “So, Jen, what do you have next?”

He finished chewing the bite of his PB&J before answering. “I have a double free, and the art room is open, so I think I’m going to work on my portfolio.”

“That’s great,” Genevieve exclaimed. “Jared was bragging about your art all of Sunday afternoon.”

Jensen quirked an eyebrow, feeling uneasy about everyone else knowing about his works. “Where did you see Jared?”

Gen’s eyes widened as she misinterpreted his perturbed tone. “Oh, God! We all,” she gesticulated haphazardly around them, “we live in the same district, we’re basically all neighbors!”

“Cool,” Jensen nodded uncertainly, too wrapped up in trying to find a way for his art to go back to anonymity to bother much with Genevieve’s anxiety over the mix-up. He tossed his paper bag into the bin just as the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. He made a quick escape- no matter what,
he’d never feel totally comfortable without Chris and or Jared there- heading to the art room where he could relax and let go.

Thinking that he’d be alone, Jen was shocked to find someone already at work there. He leaned against the door jamb, evaluating the boy’s work with a critical eye. The kid had some talent, no doubt, but he could use some major work with his details, line work and use of color. Before he could clear his throat so as not to startle him, the boy caught a glimpse of him in his peripheral vision and sprang up in the air, green paint sloshing down the front of his left pant leg.

“Gah!” he yelped, looking helplessly with wide eyes between the stain on his jeans and a frozen Jensen. He took a few quick breaths then aimed a tiny, sheepish smile at him. “Um…hi?”

Jensen couldn’t help himself. He burst out laughing, doubling over with the force of it. He was grateful to hear the boy start laughing with him, because he would have hated to offend him.

“God, Kid, you gotta be more aware of your surroundings,” he chuckled, a tear slipping from the corner of his eye in his mirth. The boy grinned at him, eyes sparkling.

“I kind of get lost in the zone when I paint, you know?” he explained with half a shrug, rubbing the back of his neck shyly. Jensen’s lips quirked; by the laws of probability, he guessed he was bound to meet someone who shared his art geek at some point in his life. “Well, no, how would you know?” The boy continued to speak, mostly to himself as he scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the ground. If Jen had to hazard a guess, it would be that this boy was a freshman. “It’s not like you paint, and get zoned out randomly…”

“Actually,” Jensen interrupted with a reassuring smile, flicking his head in the direction of his open canvas, “I know exactly what you mean.”

“That’s yours?!” the boy gaped, shyness forgotten in favor of his awe. “You’re the Stars At Midnight Over Texas?”

“Well, no,” he smirked in amusement, “the painting is. I’m just Jensen.”

The boy blushed again, ducking his head with a rueful smile. “I’m sorry, I geeked out again. Nice to meet you, Jensen, I’m Conner.”

“Good to meet you too, Conner,” he smiled amicably. “And don’t worry, I geek out about art almost on a daily basis.” He made his way to his still unfinished canvas, for the first time not feeling self-conscious of someone else seeing his unfinished painting.

“I’ve been trying to figure out who could paint something like that,” Conner followed him, bouncing on the balls of his feet. The kid had a good energy. “I mean, that’s not school level, that’s professional stuff right there!”

“I’m glad you think so, kid,” he smiled, his cheeks heating mildly in a pleased blush. Impulsively, he decided to offer his advice. “Your work shows some pretty promising talent itself, you just need to bring in the more technical aspect of art to it. The passion and the enthusiasm is there, though, and that’s the biggest battle won.”

“You think?” Conner brightened, smiling brightly. “That I have promise, I mean?”

Jensen nodded resolutely. “Of course I do.”

“Would you…” the boy blushed again, looking down and trying to force the words from where it was stuck in his throat. “Would you…I don’t know…would you maybe mind…you know, giving
me…uh, any pointers, and things, so I can…um…improve?”

Jensen started slightly in pleasant surprise. “Sure Conner,” he nodded slowly. “I think I can do that.”

“Aw, well isn’t this little nerd herd cute?”

The hateful voice was one Jensen could recognize, despite the fact that he’d met its owner all of 3 times.

Sandra McCoy.

The pretty girl was standing in the doorway with her arms folded over her chest, sneering at them in resentment. Jensen sighed inwardly; he wasn’t even sure anymore, what fight they were having, but he mentally prepared himself in any case.

“Hi, Sandy,” he greeted evenly, a tight smile stretching over his resisting facial muscles. “Always such a pleasure.”

She sneered at him once more, before turning her eyes to his painting. His muscles coiled and unease settled like a boulder in the pit of his stomach.

“What a pretty painting, Jen,” she simpered, and he cringed at the sound of Jared’s nickname coming out of her mouth, sounding like a foul curse. “I think it needs some color, though…”

Before Jensen could react, she snaked her arm out and grabbed the open pot of red paint sitting on his easel, flinging it over his painting.

Born from years of practice, Jen’s body locked down and he went stoic, unable to react to the mess that was supposed to be the centerpiece of his portfolio. Conner however, extended no such practice.

“No!” he gasped, one hand reaching towards the painting in a delayed defensive reaction, looking at the dripping disaster. His face was set in an aghast expression. “You ruined it!”

“Aw, Jensen honey, you have a groupie,” Sandy cooed mockingly, taking a step towards Conner. Protective instincts rarely honed sprang to the surface, and Jensen quickly placed himself halfway in front of Conner.

“Leave the kid out of this,” he commanded lowly. “Whatever your problem is, it is obviously with me, and not him.”

Jensen was beyond relieved when Conner took the opportunity he’d created and scampered away from the art room. Now just to face the Queen Bitch…

“Look,” he tried for a placating tone, fighting past his anger and the despair at seeing some of his best work destroyed. “I don’t know what your problem is with me, but can…”

“I’ll tell you what my problem is!” she interrupted him shrilly, losing any façade of calm she once possessed. “My problem is you! You don’t belong here, Jensen, and you most certainly don’t belong with Jared! I do! I’m his soulmate, not you!”

“Well, I don’t know about soulmate,” Jensen fought the urge to roll his eyes, “but I am his boyfriend until he or I says otherwise, so I can see why you have a problem.”

“I don’t have a problem, you do!” she snapped. “We were meant to be together, no matter what Jared says, you’re not what he thinks you are.”
“You’re right,” he nodded mock solemnly. “I told him I was a normal boy, but really, I’m Batman.”

A look of disbelief flitted across her face. “Wait…you don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?” Jensen frowned, trying to ignore the seed of unease in his gut. “That you’re a raving lunatic?”

Even though he saw the slap coming, he couldn’t bring himself to raise a hand in defense. Her hand slammed into his cheek, the sharp burn telling him she drew blood somehow. The slap left his face stinging, and it took every ounce of his energy not to react. He brought his hand to his cheek and he wasn’t surprised when it came back wet with blood. Three slashes across his cheek? The girl must’ve had some kind of French tips.

He looked at her, the calm and even expression on his face designed to set her off even further.

“You need to learn some respect!” she hissed, raising her hand once more. Jensen was about to shield his face, still not wanting to hurt her, when suddenly another hand shot out, gripping her wrist with what even Jensen could tell was brutal force.

Jared?

No. Not Jared.

Who?

“You need to learn to keep your crazy better hidden, it’s starting to show, McCoy,” Chad snarled. Jensen’s eyes widened at the source of the unexpected help. Conner hovered in the doorway, and Jensen put two and two together; the kid had gone to Chad for help. A wave of gratitude fell over him.

Chad flicked Sandy’s hand away, obviously not sharing Jensen’s discomfort for retaliation. He ran a cursory gaze over Jensen’s form, eyes narrowing dangerously when he zeroed in on the scratches on his cheek. He whirled around.

“Let me put this in a way you can understand, McCoy,” he snapped angrily. “Jared. Does. Not. Want. You. He wants Jen. So let me be very clear when I say that Jensen is family now. You lay a single hand on him again, and Jared is gonna be the least of your worries.”

Jensen was shocked by the protective tone, grateful for the sentiment from Chad, who he was never fully certain had accepted him. The blonde boy wrapped a supportive arm around his shoulder and guided him out of the class, dismissing Conner with an authoritative flick of his head. Jen was numb as Chad led him to one of the benches at the front of the school.

“You okay, Jense?” Chad’s uncharacteristically serious and concerned voice cut through Jensen’s shock. He looked up at Chad, nodding slowly.

“Yeah,” he cleared his throat, sitting on the bench. “Yeah, I’m good. Are you?”

Chad grinned, his face relaxing. “Nope,” he shook his head teasingly, “because you just got your ass kicked by a girl.”

Jensen snorted derisively, the tension between them melting away. “I wouldn’t really call her a girl.”

Chad froze, his face losing some of its color. “What do you mean?” he asked slowly. Jensen frowned, confused at Chad’s reaction.
“That girl doesn’t have nails, she has claws,” he joked. “Or a really good French manicurist.”

Chad laughed, but it sounded more forced than normal. “Yeah,” he nodded, running a hand through his hair. “I hear you, man.”

“So…” Jensen hesitated. “Thanks for all of that back there.”

“Jared aint the only white knight around here,” he grinned, the smile looking more genuine now. “We just like to let him think he is.”

Jensen shook his head with a smile. “So why aren’t you with them today?” he asked. Chad looked alarmed once more, and although Jensen was beyond suspicious about Chad’s edginess, he hastened to clarify. “Aren’t you close to Jared’s older brother too? I mean, since you and Jared have known each other so long.”

“Oh,” Chad laughed weakly. “No man, Jeff always hated how much better looking I was.”

“It’s a wonder you don’t have a girlfriend, Murray,” Jensen remarked wryly.

Chad wrinkled his nose in mock confusion. “You know, Jense, my mom says the exact same thing…” Jensen laughed, feeling more comfortable with Chad than he could have anticipated. The blond grinned at him and perched on the edge of the top of the bench. “Naw, I had to come to this dump,” he jerked his thumb at the school building, “to meet with that career guidance counselor. My mom thought getting some direction in my life was more important than a reunion with my buddies.” The disgruntled tone of his voice made it clear that Chad didn’t share that opinion.

“So what’d did the guy say, anyhow?” he asked, trying to change topics.

“He said that with my drop-dead gorgeous looks and questionable skill set, it seems only natural for me to go into the stripping business,” Chad smirked, holding his arms out as if to display his body. Jensen smiled, the wise-crack unable to stop him from noticing that the mirth didn’t reach Chad’s eyes.

“I don’t know,” he said lightly. “Anyone who can play pool like you can must obviously be a Physics nut, and correct me if I’m wrong, but you have this weird knack of seeing deeper into people than sometimes even they can see. If you ask me, I think you’d make an excellent psychiatrist or therapist, or anything you want to be really.”

Chad’s smile slid off his face and a vulnerable look of uncertainty came over him. “I don’t think so, Jense. I’m not…”

“You are,” Jensen refuted gently. “I get it. People see you as this smartass football player who’s just another jock with no brains and a future in Hero-To-Zero. Thing is, Chad, is that people’s opinions shouldn’t matter. You know how smart you are, even if you choose not to show it, and if people can’t see you for exactly how talented and gifted you are… well, then those people don’t really matter, now, do they?”

“You honestly think I’m better than all of this, don’t you?” Chad asked, the barest hint of awe coloring his tone. Jensen nodded firmly.

“I know you are.”

Chad hesitated for a while before tentatively offering; “I really like physics, but I’ve always been into the idea of working with kids, getting into their minds and trying to help them. You think there’s any demand for like, a child psychologist or something?”
Jensen grinned encouragingly, leaning into a more comfortable position so they could talk. “The world is in desperate demand for Chad,” he smirked. “If he’s in the form of a child psychologist, why the hell not?”

~*Jared*~

Jared finally understood why people so detested Mondays.

The day was a nightmare from start to finish. When he’d woken up, for the first time excited to go to school, his dad had come into his room and told him that the Alpha of the rival pack wanted to meet. He needed Jared, Chris and Chad to be there for the meet, and Jeff was even coming in from where he’d escaped to a couple years ago, choosing a family life over the life of an Alpha heir. On top of not getting to see Jen for the whole day, Chad also couldn’t make it for the meet, after his mom insisted that his career guidance meeting was more important than being back-up. Jared felt the briefest twinge of jealousy- he wished his parents would even entertain the possibility that he could do more than take over his father’s business- but he quickly dismissed it.

The meet had gone on the entire day without any real progress. There was a lot of backhanded jibes and far too many close calls from both parties, and they were no closer to living together peacefully. Jared’s gut sensed a war on the horizon, and he hoped to God he was wrong.

Still in their wolf form, he gestured to Chris that he should join him. He was on his way to the little creek they had found when they were all pups, and he knew his friends would be waiting there to get the low-down on what happened with the Morgan Pack. Chris seemed to hesitate slightly, before slowly shaking his head. Jared didn’t need to shift to understand what Chris was trying to say; he was only comfortable around them when Jensen was there too. Jared pawed the ground, indicating his acceptance, and broke into a run, needing to let out his pent-up energy. He felt worried about Jensen for some reason, during the meet, and though he knew his friends would look out for his mate, he was still as anxious for a report of their day as they were for his own report back.

Jared felt peaceful as his powerful legs ate up the distance. His paws felt amazing against the woodsy soil, and the wind rippling his brown-black fur brought back the comfort that his wolf always supplied. Too soon, he was at the creek, and sure enough, his gang was lounging there in human form, clearly awaiting him. He looked around for Chad, who he knew would have brought him jeans, and was slightly alarmed when he saw the blond was not among them.

Before he could decide how to phrase his question, the man himself burst into the clearing, panting slightly. “Sorry I’m late,” he apologized sheepishly, tossing the pair of jeans at Jared. He caught them gently in his teeth before retreating to the cover of the shadows to shift back and yank on the denims.

“What happened?” he asked when he came out. Chad turned to him with a tempered expression on his face.

“I was with Jensen, walking him home. Your bitch of an ex-girlfriend is what happened.”

Jared’s gut clenched and he listened with mounting anger as Chad relayed his story; how he was heading to the ground to practice a few throws when a random freshman came and told him that someone was bullying Jensen. How he got to the art room to see Jensen’s painting destroyed and his cheek slashed open with distinctive marks, with Sandy poised to hit him again and her nails elongated into claws. How he heard her telling Jensen that she was supposed to be Jared’s soulmate, not the other way around. By the time Chad was finished, Jared was seeing red.
“Where is she?” he demanded, itching to get to the beta for daring to lay a hand on Jen.

“That might not be the worst of your worries, Jay-Man,” Genevieve interrupted, looking troubled. “I was telling Jensen about you bragging about his art, and I think he might’ve thought I had put my foot in my mouth because I said I had seen you on Sunday. He seemed upset, I think he might have thought there was something going on between us.”

“Jesus, Genevieve,” Jared groaned, panic mounting. “Anything else happen that I should know about?” He began to back away from the clearing, not expecting an answer.

“Are you sure that Jensen doesn’t know about the pack?” Chad blurted, stopping Jared cold. His blood turned to ice as he turned to his best friend, paling spectacularly.

“What are you talking about?” he asked slowly, almost choking on his dread. If Jen found out from someone other than him…that was the end.

“Just some things he said today,” Chad fidgeted, his nervousness out of character. “He said that he wouldn’t call Sandy a girl, and that she had claws instead of nails, and then he asked me why I wasn’t with you guys today, as though he knew the alphas of the pack had to be present at today’s meet.”

Jared was torn. There was a chance that his boyfriend had found them out, but Jared also knew Jensen. His mate was sharp as a tack when it came to reading people and their dynamics, and so attuned was he to Jared, it would make sense that he would want to know why Chad wasn’t where Jared was. He recognized that they were generally in the same vicinity of each other, even if he didn’t know the reason behind it. The other two comments sounded so typical of Jen’s sarcasm, that if he was lucky, he was still in the clear.

“He’s too genuine,” Tom’s voice broke the silence. Everyone turned to look at him, and he shrugged calmly. “Jensen is too genuine a person to keep a secret of him knowing. I may not have bonded with him over Jared like Genevieve and Danni, I may not have a raving crush on him like Meesh,” Jared stifled a growl at that, “and I may not have a pool-table-brotherhood with the guy, like Chad, but if there’s anything I can tell off the bat with him, its that Jensen isn’t that type of guy. If he knew, he would have told you by now.”

Jared was stunned by his friend’s accurate and whole-hearted description and acceptance of his mate. It meant a lot to him, since Tom had warned him against Sandy from the get-go, and he relaxed now, remembering to trust Jen…and he did.

Which only left Sandy to deal with before he went to check on his stunning, precious mate.

He found the beta easily enough, and no matter what calm he’d built up, his vision was still bathed in crimson the minute he saw her, and it didn’t help that she was bad-mouthing his mate to Milo.

In the next second, he had her loosely pinned against the tree, her throat instinctively bared in submission to the future Alpha. “How dare you touch him?” he snarled protectively. “Did you honestly think you could make the love of my life bleed and expect me to be okay with that?”

“Jar…Jared, I…I didn’t…” she stammered, eyes wide. Jared was vaguely aware of Milo trying hesitantly to pull his arm even a little away, but a single warning snarl thrown over his shoulder took care of that.

“You don’t ever come near my Jensen again, do you hear me? I mean, do I make myself clear?!” The growl ripped through his teeth, his body hot and his wolf hovering dangerously close to the
“Yes, Alpha,” Sandy nodded meekly. It took all his willpower, but he let her go, still unwilling to hurt her physically. He took a few deep breaths, unable to truly let go of his anger.

“I’ve known you a long time, Sandy,” he said coldly, “but I’m not sure who you are anymore. Let me be frank when I say that if there is a next time, if you ever hurt him again, if you so much as look at him wrong, no amount of history between us will stop me acting on my instincts to protect Jensen. At any cost.”

Walking away with that lilting threat looming, Jared was so caught up in his anger that he didn’t even notice Milo showing Sandy his phone, and the small, devious smile that replaced her fear.

~*Chris*~

“Remind me again why I can’t do anything about the bitch?” Chris snarled in barely contained rage. For once, they’d reached school at the same time, and Chris was greeted to the sight of Jen’s slashed open cheek. The alpha and protector in him was ready to rip the beta’s throat out, but Jen could neither witness that, nor was he willing to budge on his argument that Chris shouldn’t retaliate.

“Because you’re a stand-up guy and she isn’t worth it,” Jensen repeated obediently. Chris continued his litany of complaints as they walked to the school doors, barely suppressing the urge to haul his best friend to the nurse, just in case he didn’t clean it out properly. God himself only knew where Sandy had her filthy paws.

“I’m telling you, Freckles, I…” Chris stopped dead when they opened the doors. The hallways were littered with A5 sheets of paper, all showing the same picture:

Jared pressing Sandy up against a tree, with the caption: *The best way to spend my Monday*

His forearm was loosely pinning her by her shoulders, the other hand trapping her right wrist against the tree. You couldn’t see Jared’s expression, but by the proximity of their bodies, you didn’t have to.

Chris flushed with the force of his fury. “I’m going to kill him,” he vowed in a low rumble, gripping one of the papers in one tightly clenched fist and storming away from an immobile Jensen, feeling badly for leaving him like that, but also not wanting to be near him for how angry he was.

He walked up to the tall Alpha and spun him around roughly. “What the fuck do you think you’re playing at, Padalecki?” he snarled menacingly. Jared glared at him in annoyance.

“What the fuck are you talking about, man?” he asked incredulously. Without a word, Chris shoved the piece of paper at him. Padalecki stared at it, shocked, becoming white as a sheet. His breath was coming out in shallow pants and a desperate gleam entered his eyes.

“Jensen…” he whispered, nearly a whimper. He turned in despair to Chris, who was torn between slugging him on principle and listening to his gut, which told him the other alpha hadn’t been seducing his bitch of an ex-girlfriend. “Where’s Jensen?” he asked, pleading now. “Please Chris, you can punch me later, you gotta tell me where Jen is!”

“Why the hell should I?” Chris demanded, slightly more lucid now, but still simmering with rage.

“Listen, Kane,” Chad butted in evenly, his somber tone speaking to Chris more than Jared’s
desperation for how rare it was. “Jared went over to Sandy yesterday to tell her to leave Jensen alone. My best guess? He lost his temper. But I can tell you right now, he’s too in love with Jensen to even contemplate hurting him like that. You gotta tell him where he is, so that he can tell Jensen himself.”

Chris hesitated a moment before nodding jerkily, his gut winning out. “It doesn’t help. Jensen saw all the pictures. He’s probably halfway home by now.”

“First Genevieve’s comment, then Sandy’s insults and now this.” Jared ran his hand through his hair, the force of it making it seem more like the boy was aiming to yank his hair out. His brown eyes glistened suspiciously as he bent over, his hands on his knees. “Why the fuck does everything work against us?” he muttered, mostly to himself.

He grabbed his bag, and Chris knew he was going after Jensen.

Only, it turned out they didn’t have to.

Jensen stormed past them, not even seeming to realize they were right there, marching determinedly to the table where Sandy and her cronies sat. He slammed the picture down on the table in front of her, making her let out a little scream of shock.

Chris exchanged looks with Jared and Chad, the whole pack moving simultaneously to where Jensen was.

“Listen to me, Sandy, and listen well,” he commanded, his voice flinty and ice-cold. They slowed, able to hear everything that Jensen was saying. “You can say whatever the fuck you want about me, and you can do whatever the fuck you want to me, but now you’re messing with Jared and his reputation, and that is not okay with me!” he snarled. “This is between you and me, so you leave him out of this! If this was your brilliant idea to make me rethink being with him, then you’re more than just a bitch, you’re fucking clueless too. I trust Jared with my life, and I don’t care about whatever he might be hiding because I know it’s not this. He would never hurt anyone like that. He’s got more honor and integrity in his left little toe than you have had in your entire life combined, and if you ever even think of undermining that—undermining him!—to get back at me, then you and I are going to have some serious problems.” He leaned in close, still not seeming to even realize that they, or anyone else, was there. “Jared is amazing,” he stated lowly, “and I pity you for letting him go. But don’t you dare hurt him just to get back at me. Don’t you dare hurt him, period. You do what you want to do, but to me, not to anyone else. You got that?”

Huh…it took him a minute, but Chris finally identified the fierce burning in his chest.

He was so proud of his best friend.

~*Jared*~

The barest hint of a breeze would have knocked him off his feet just then.

Just a few seconds ago, he’d been on the edge, so sick of everything and everyone working against him and Jen, trying to pull them apart at every God damned turn.

Now?

He was awed, gratified, and so freaking in love it was barely believable. Jensen had fought against those odds. He hadn’t stood up for himself, but he’d stood up for Jared, he’d stood up for them, with
every possible reason in the world not to. He had every right to confront Jared, or even leave him, because it was obvious the picture wasn’t photo-shopped, but instead, Jen had such faith in Jared and in their relationship, that he’d taken a giant leap of trust and actually defended Jared against Sandy. It was the last thing on his mind, but Jensen had been worried about his reputation.

His mate still hadn’t even noticed they were there yet, and quite frankly, Jared wanted his mate too fucking much to stay there much longer.

“Jen, baby…” he murmured. As if attuned to his voice, Jen responded, straightening up and turning around.

“Jay…” his mate breathed, sounding relieved and exhausted. “I’m so sorry about…”

“Don’t,” he smiled, unable to find it in himself to taint his happiness and love by dealing with Sandy at that moment. He would leave that to Chad and Chris, who would both undoubtedly want revenge on behalf of their best friends. He took Jensen’s hand and pulled him to his truck, walking quickly through the small crowd that gathered, needing to get Jen into his arms, feel his mate’s lips on his.

As soon as they rounded the truck and came into semi-privacy, he backed Jen up against the door, claiming his lips roughly with his own. His tongue plundered Jensen’s mouth, swallowing the smaller boy’s sinful moans.

“God, baby…” Jared growled, slipping his hand down to palm and grope at Jensen’s ass. “Ditch with me,” he said impulsively. He needed to be alone with Jen, and he needed to hold him, and assure him, and thank him so profusely for being him and for believing in them even when every bone in his body must have fought his heart’s decision. “I need to just be with you, away from the rest of the world for a little while,” he admitted, not caring about the desperation in his tone. “Please, Jen? Will you let me be with you?”

He chanced a look at Jen, and was met with sparkling green eyes that stole his breath away in the same manner that Jensen Ackles had stolen his heart; instantaneously.

Looking up at him from under those ridiculously sexy long lashes, Jen smiled brilliantly and nodded.

“Forever and always."

###

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys liked the chapter, and the little Chad scene! I promise the next scene will be hotter than this one! ;-) 

-JayGirl
Shifting

Chapter Notes

I got this chapter done sooner than expected, so surprise! It's not as long as the last few, but definitely as jam-packed! I hope you enjoy!

Big shout out to Serenafray05, Catsss, j2_is_life and Claire, and also to cheery_pie and hiddenscribbles, who I missed this week!

Once more, I cannot begin to thank you all enough. You humble me.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

“…and then Chris nearly punch my lights out when he showed me what Sandy had done,” Jared concluded. They had come back to their clearing in the forest and after they had cuddled a little, basking in being together, Jared had begun his story about how the picture got taken, and everything that happened thereafter. Jen remained silent, letting his boyfriend talk, returning the favor since Jared had let him tell his story without interruption. He could appreciate the effort that took, especially when he told Jared about Sandy ruining his painting. “I was so sick of everything working so much against us, Jen,” he admitted, hiding his face in Jensen’s neck. “Sometimes it feels like everything is conspiring to break us apart.”

Jensen’s heart squeezed in sympathy. He had been so blinded by rage at the tangible proof that Sandy would hurt Jared that he hadn’t even had time to consider the effect it had had on his boyfriend. Jared must have thought Jensen was distraught and ready to break up. Hell, if it was anyone else, Jensen thought he might have been. The trust he had in Jared never ceased to amaze him. He looked at the floppy-haired boy and the pain in those hazel orbs stole his breath. He pushed away a lock of stubborn hair and he pressed his forehead against Jared’s. “I’m so sorry, Jay,” he pressed little kisses all over Jared’s face until he relaxed slightly. “I should have come to you first, and told you that I was okay, that we were okay. I just…I was so angry, you know? What must all the teachers now think, with Sandy’s little attempt to get back at me? I didn’t even think to come to you, all that was going through my mind was telling Sandy to leave you the hell out of all this.”

He wriggled down so that there were on eye-level. Cupping Jared’s face gently with his hands, he looked resolutely into his wide, melted Hershey kisses eyes. He couldn’t yet say the three words he really wanted to say, but he knew that he needed to reassure Jared that he wasn’t alone in what he was feeling. “You should know…I don’t have faith in much. I don’t believe in much. But this? When I was faced with this? I didn’t have a single doubt in my mind that you wouldn’t hurt me like that. For everything in the world that I don’t believe in, I’ll be damned if I don’t believe in us.”

Jared pulled away to look at him and Jensen pressed their foreheads together once more, needing the closeness. He ghosted their lips together, once, twice…chaste little kisses that started a slow burning blaze deep inside him. “Jay,” he whispered, keeping his eyes closed. “I don’t know much, and I can’t control the future, but I can tell you this: for as long as we’re together, there is no force in the world strong enough to take me away from you.” Jensen’s heart clenched in uncertainty, forcing
himself not to wonder whether Jared could be taken from him; as strong as he could be for Jared, it would mean nothing if it wasn’t a two-way thing. “Whenever it feels like they’re conspiring against us, you tell me, and I’ll show you that even if they are, they’re fighting a losing battle.” He finally opened his eyes to find Jared’s hazel eyes watching him, silent tears clinging obstinately to the ends of his lashes. “We’re the best team there is, babe,” he smiled, the nickname slipping from his lips without conscious thought on his part.

Those stubborn tears finally fell from Jared’s eyes as he surged forward to fuse their lips, arms wrapping around Jensen in a passionate embrace. He devoured Jensen’s mouth, swallowing every moan and plea that fell from his lips. Jensen pressed forward, eager for the feel of Jared, reveling in every inch of him being pressed into the ground by Jared’s hard, toned body. He wasn’t sure at what point in time he’d developed such an iron-strong belief in them, but he liked it. It felt like he could finally rest his head on something real...like he could finally lean on someone and like he was finally loved. At the same time that it was so easy to be Jared’s, he knew that it wasn’t something that would happen again. Deep-seated certainty told him that he would never feel this way about another as long as he lived.

Maybe he felt the deep change in Jensen’s line of thought, because Jared slowed the kiss, less hungry and more languorous, not lacking passion, just lacking the hurry they usually kissed with. Jared kissed him like he was mapping out every ridge of Jensen’s mouth, hands touching like there would be a test on every contour and angle of his body. He kissed him like they had all the time in the world, and like he was starved for the taste and feel and touch of Jensen. He kissed him like he was the most precious thing in the world and like he was savoring each second that he got to spend like this. God, he could spend his entire life kissing Jared...Jensen tasted the saltiness of tears on his boyfriend’s lips, and in an urge to comfort, he snaked his hand up Jared’s neck, reaching to tangle it in the locks he so loved to play with.

When they finally pulled away, neither of them really felt like talking. Jared rolled on to his back, taking Jensen with him so that he was sprawled over his chest. Jensen buried his face in Jared’s neck, inhaling deeply, enjoying the woody, almost spicy scent that seemed unique to his boyfriend. Jared nuzzled his hair and Jensen suppressed a smile at the puppy-like behavior. Almost unthinkingly, they joined their hands, being close to each other enough for them in that moment.

Jensen turned his head and pressed his lips to the hollow at Jared’s throat. His chest rumbled with satisfaction and Jensen smiled against his skin.

“Jen?” Jared murmured, his hands around Jensen tightening until he took the hint not to move.

“Mm?” He settled against Jared’s chest more comfortably, entirely too content to just stay there.

“Thank you for believing in me,” Jared whispered. “For believing in us. I know every part of you must have been rebelling and wanting to leave me, but thank you for having faith in us. For knowing me. For knowing that I would sooner die than to hurt you. Against the worst of odds, you still stood by me, and I’m not even sure I would have had that kind of strength. Thank you, baby...just, a million times, thank you.”

Small kisses rained over the nape of Jensen’s neck, hot splashes from tears tickling him. Jensen balled his fists in Jared’s shirt, his own tears now pressing into the soft material.

“I’ll always stand by you,” he murmured thickly. “The sky itself could come crashing down on us, and I’d still be right there next to you. You’re everything to me.”

Jensen pushed back a little to look at his boyfriend, reaching a hand up to caress his cheek, fingers lightly tracing the shadows under his hazel eyes. “You didn’t sleep last night,” he observed, his heart clenching in worry. He shimmied up Jared’s body, cursing his hormones as the feel stirred the
embers pooled low in his stomach. He rolled off Jared, landing on his back and pulling his boyfriend’s arm, encouraging him to pillow his head on Jensen’s shoulder. Jared snuggled into him, wrapping his long arms around Jensen’s waist, and Jensen enjoyed being able to do for Jared what Jared usually did for him.

He carded his fingers gently through Jared’s hair, absently humming a soothing tune under his breath until the taller boy’s breathing evened out. He pressed a gentle kiss to Jared’s hair, content to stay like that until he woke up…he really needed the rest, it seemed.

Unfortunately, the stillness also gave Jensen’s mind plenty of time to wonder.

It terrified him that Jared was being so patient about the day he’d found Jensen lying in his kitchen, bloodied and battered. Terrified him, because it all the more accentuated the fact that Jared deserved to know what was happening. How could he tell his boyfriend, though, that it wasn’t someone random, but his own foster father who was beating him? Jared would freak. Either he would hurt, or God forbid, kill Eric, or he would decide that there was too much baggage to handle and walk away. It was the second option that scared him the most, because how could he handle Jared walking away from him? It surely wouldn’t be the case, that Jared would simply kiss him and tell him that he supported Jensen in whatever he chose to do, because there was no way Jared would stand back when Jensen was getting hurt, a fact that was both comforting, and distressing. It wasn’t like he could go his whole life without saying anything about it, though. He’d explored that option, but it wasn’t feasible, because what kind of a relationship would they have if Jensen was always holding back a certain part of himself? As much as he hated to admit it, the abuse was and always would be a part of his life. He’d decided a long time ago not to let it control or define him, to just have it be part of him that taught him to be strong and survive, but at the same time, he couldn’t expect Jared to understand. Sometimes, when he was curled in a ball on the floor or bent over in pain in the shower, he didn’t quite understand it himself. He hated to keep secrets from Jared…

…but then, he wasn’t the only secretive one here.

He knew that Jared was keeping a secret. He didn’t know what, and that bothered him more than he wanted to say. When he’d seen that picture of Jared and Sandy… he couldn’t help his mind immediately flashing back to catching Adam cheating on him in the school gymnasium. It was actually that memory that convinced him Jared could have never hurt him like that, because if there was ever anything in the world that Jensen was sure of, it was that Jared was NOT Adam. As scarred as he was by Adam’s abuse and his cheating, Jensen had been healing by every one of Jared’s tender touches and whispered words of devotion and adoration. While this almost made up for whatever big secret Jared was withholding from him, it didn’t change the fact hanging over Jensen like a dark cloud, that whatever the secret was, it could destroy them just as surely as Jensen’s own secrets could.

Jensen looked down at the mop of brown hair that splayed over his chest, and the gentle curve of Jared’s face peeking through. Smoothed now, and unencumbered by the problems of the real world, Jared looked content and peaceful and younger than he usually did. His forehead bore no creases and his mouth was lax, and the only other expression Jensen found as endearing, was the one with Jared’s smile. There was no denying the fact that he had fallen in love with Jared. He wanted to be angry with himself for falling into the trap that seemed so cliché and teenager, but whatever the burning was inside of him whenever he so much as thought of Jared…was there anything else that feeling could possibly be defined as? Suddenly, a line to the old song Jody used to sing all the time popped into his head;

_I don’t know much…but I know I love you. And that may be, all I need to know._
Jensen brushed a kiss light as air over Jared’s hair. Maybe it was true. Maybe it would be enough just to know that he loved Jared.

He sang the line softly, not wanting to wake Jared up but feeling an almost overwhelming need to tell him nonetheless.

“I don’t know much…but I know I love you. And that may be all I need to know.”

###

Crash, thunk!

Chad’s grin split across his face. “Stripes thirteen, center pocket, just like you said.” His voice was awed, and Jensen smiled at his excitement, so different from the disgruntled looks of the third team they were schooling that night alone. They had come to Impala with Jared and Chris, who were sitting at the booth, all four of them having agreed to hang out a little while. Chad made a mean partner, and they were literally unbeatable, but Jensen couldn’t help but miss his partner.

He looked over at Jared, who was in deep conversation with Chris. He wondered idly what they were talking about, making a mental note to ask Chris about it tomorrow.

“Stripes nine, corner pocket,” he called, leaning down to align his shot. He took a deep breath and jerked his wrist, twisting it perfectly so that the ball hit off the table and spun to the right corner. A smug smile found its way to his face when Chad whooped as the ball sunk neatly into the pocket.

He straightened up, tensing when a voice sounded from behind him;

“Oh, don’t get up, you looked so damn fuck-able all spread out for me like that.”

Jensen turned around, his blood simmering slightly as he met the smirking face of one Jake Abel.

~*Jared*~

“She knows that Jensen doesn’t know about the Weres, and that you’re an Alpha,” Chris pointed out in frustration. “You honestly think Sandy is not going to use that to cause trouble? And what if someone else spills the beans to him? What then? He deserves to know, and he deserves for you to be the one to tell him, Jared!”

They were in Impala, Chad and Jen playing the pool circuit while Jared and Chris were discussing the fact that Jared needed to tell Jensen about their secret. Jared wanted so badly to argue, to tell Chris to mind his own business, to insist that they were handling it fine and that nothing would go wrong...

Jared knew it was a vain hope to think that Sandy wouldn’t make use of the fact that she knew Jensen was in the dark about their lives. Like it or not, the time to keep this from Jen was quickly coming to a close. All his fears came rushing to the surface and he felt an overwhelming desire to be close to his Jen.

He glanced over at his boyfriend, who was calling a shot and leaning down to take it. A rush of love flowed through his veins as Jen made the pocket, Chad cheering and Jensen simply grinning in satisfaction. Jared’s blood ran cold when Jensen straightened up, and Jake and his cronies, Sebastian and Mark, were standing behind him.
He didn’t hear what Jake said, but both Jensen and Chad tensed up. Chris and him got up together, striding quickly to them.

“Back off, Abel,” he heard Chad growl menacingly. Instantly, his body flushed with anger at the implication that Abel had been interfering with his mate again. After the first time he’d slammed the guy into the side of the school building, you’d think he’d have heeded the warning to leave Jen alone.

“The bitch likes all the attention, Murray,” Jake responded snidely. “Don’t you, you little whore?” he turned to Jensen and Jared was ready to tear the boy’s throat out for daring to talk to his mate, let alone insult him.

“You must be confusing me with a mirror,” Jensen replied before Jared could act on his impulse, making him grin despite his anger. The boy started forward, but stopped when Chad stepped slightly in front of Jensen and Jared and Chris finally managed to push their way through the crowd that gathered.

“Don’t mind him, Jake,” Shepard sneered, aiming his glare at a fuming Jared. “He’s got a fine mouth now because his little bodyguards are here.”

“Yeah,” Jake jeered, lip upturned in a disparaging motion, stepping even closer to Jensen until they were only inches apart. Jared barely suppressed the urge to floor the arrogant boy, needing to wait for Jen to give some kind of signal that it was okay to deck him. He didn’t want to have a fight with Jen about him being over-protective, but Jake was really pushing it…

“Besides,” Abel continued, looking scornfully at Jensen, “look at them. It’s not like the hulking jocks are good for anything else, except maybe taking turns to fuck him.”

This would have been the comment that threw Jared over the edge…if it hadn’t thrown Jensen off first.

In a move so fast that none of them could have anticipated it, wolf senses and all, Jensen’s knee shot up, nailing the boy in the sternum before he threw a right hook and a quick follow-up elbow jab that floored Jake faster than he could take a second breath. Blood painted his mouth and gushed from his nose as he lay there wailing and swearing blue murder. Chris, Jared and Chad were standing stock-still, only snapping out of their stunned reveries when Jensen rotated his wrist experimentally and picked up his jacket.

“Whoops, I think I might have tripped into you there, Abel,” he commented lightly, shrugging his leather jacket on. Leaning down, he spoke in a whisper only they could hear. “Don’t you ever talk about them like that again.”

Casually, Jensen turned around and walked away. They followed him, Chris ginning like a maniac, Chad laughing his ass off and Jared wanting nothing more than to get his mate horizontal (or even vertical) on the nearest available surface.

“That was sick, Freckles, where’d you learn to fight like that?!” Chris asked excitedly.

“You know I have 17 years of history before you guys met me, right?” Jensen grinned sheepishly. “You pick up a couple things along the way.”

“Then why didn’t you deck Sandy?” Chad demanded. Jensen snorted.

“I may not be entirely sure what Sandy is,” he shook his head, “but I don’t hit girls. Or girl-resembling devil spawn.”
Jared roared with laughter, grabbing Jensen in a hug and kissing him firmly. It was all he could do not to take his mate right there and then.

“I’m so fucking proud of you,” he mumbled against Jensen’s lips, which were curving into a smile. Guard lowered, Jared couldn’t help his fleeting thought.

*God, nothing could go wrong right now...*

Famous last words.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Shepard and Roche were hauling Jake out of Impala. He still had a big mouth, even unable to walk straight. He spat out a mouthful of blood, and Jared sensed that things were about to get messy. Foreboding stilled his heart and he pushed Jensen behind him, an argument the very last concern in his mind now.

“Show him!” Abel spat, mopping at the blood and straightening to aim a challenging glare at Jared. Damn wolf-healing. “Show your precious little mate exactly who he’s defending! Show him, Padalecki!”

Jared's heart stopped at the turn their confrontation was taking and a growl ripped through his chest, at the worst possible time betrayed by his Alpha temper.

“I’m not going to tell you again to back off, Abel,” Chad growled, coming to stand next to Jared. Jared bared his teeth at Jake in warning, his canines already distending slightly in his rage.

“Come on, Freckles…” Jared was grateful for Chris trying to get Jensen out of there. Then at least, he could deal with Abel...

“Mate?” Jensen asked, alarm coloring his tone. “Jay, what’s going on?” Then aside, he hissed, “Let go, Chris!” Jared knew Jen would never have left then, but it was something to hope for at least. In a last ditch attempt to save their relationship, Jared chanced turning his back on Jake, forcing himself to calm down and leveling his desperate gaze at his boyfriend.

“Go home, Jen, please,” he pleaded softly. “I’ll explain tomorrow.”

Maybe the look in his eyes did it, or maybe it was the plea, but Jensen softened and nodded slightly. Just as he was about to relax, just as he thought maybe- *just maybe* - he was in the clear, the world and Jake Abel just had to screw him over.

“No! Show him, Jared, or I will!” Jake screamed threateningly. Not waiting for an answer, he lurched forward and shifted in mid-air, a black wolf taking his place.

Just like that, Jared's world crumbled all around him.

He heard Jensen’s choked off gasp, and he wanted immediately to go to his mate and beg him for forgiveness, but he was terrified of the disgust he knew he was going to see there. Before he could dredge up the courage to face the love of his life, Mark and Sebastian shifted too, and Jared knew that there was a bigger problem than losing Jensen’s trust and love.

And that was losing Jensen.

The three wolves advanced on them and with muttered curses, Chris and Chad flanked him. He nodded once, the pain in his heart overshadowed only by the knowledge of what would happen if he
didn’t do what he had to do. He channeled his pain into sheer rage, wanting nothing more than to get back at the ones who put him in this position.

Swallowing the bitter pill, Jared didn’t allow his tears of heartbreak and anger to fall as he, in one fell swoop, took the last step in destroying the relationship he’d begun to build with his mate.

*He shifted.*

###

Chapter End Notes

Stick with me, I promise you won't be disappointed!! -JayGirl
The magic words

Chapter Notes

On account of the awesome comments from OmgOmgOmgOmgOmg and several other readers, SURPRISE!! I worked all day to get this done, because I couldn't bear to leave you lovely people hanging the way I did! XD

I took a very daring turn with this chapter, so I'm incredibly nervous posting it, and I hope to hell you guys enjoy it!!

On a side note, to those who only saw these updates now and did not experience the cliffhanger, please still let me know how you felt about the end of the last chapter! I so enjoyed seeing everyone's reactions!!

On with the show! I hope you enjoy!

Shout out to Stormagedon, whose heart I think will be very happy with this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*Jensen*~

Werewolves.

As in…werewolves.

As in, shifting into giant furry beasts with claws and what big teeth you have there, minus the grandmother and red-hooded squint eyed chick.

As in, werewolves.

Jensen knew in some part of his mind that he was hyperventilating and he knew panic was beginning to fog up his senses. He knew that he needed to get his ass into gear… but the fact of the matter was that his boyfriend, the guy he was in love with, was now a russet brown-black wolf standing…crouching in front of him. And God, didn’t that warrant a little bit of shock?

Jared wasn’t human. He was a werewolf! And he’d kept that a secret! In the back of Jensen’s mind, he wondered idly why he seemed more upset at the secret keeping, than the secret Jared had been keeping. Then it occurred to him that it didn’t matter, because aside from the fact that there were more important matters at hand, there was also the little reminder that Jensen himself was keeping a secret of his own.

But then…werewolves!

He tried to choke out Jared’s name, beg him for an explanation, but his throat closed up. He was glad of it, in retrospect, because despite his current state of disbelief, there was still a potential fight to break up. All at once, sharp and crippling terror struck his heart like a lightning bolt; what if the Jake-Wolf was stronger than the Jared-Wolf? What if he hurt the Jared-Wolf?

The very possibility sickened him to his stomach.
And then it was clear.

It was Jared.

Jay.

His Jay.

His heart obviously held no concern for whichever…form, he was in. So why did his head?

His epiphany was cut short by a harsh growl permeating the air around him. His insides were shaking with fear, not for himself, but for Jared. He was going to fight three wolves, how would he ever…

His question was cut off mid-thought when Chad and Chris suddenly disappeared, to be replaced with a sand-colored and a copper-colored wolf respectively.

*No, of course they were werewolves too, why wouldn’t they be? Since when has Fate made it easier on me?*

Jensen dismissed his thoughts, instead choosing to be grateful that the Jared-Wolf had the back-up. The massive beast stalked forward, and in a crazy, fleeting thought, Jensen reveled in how much the motion reminded him of an angry Jared.

He was still rooted to the spot, unable to react, when Jared let out a menacing growl that made the hairs on the back of Jensen’s neck stand up. He knew that he was safe- no matter his shock, he knew without a doubt that Jared would never harm him- but he felt afraid of what Jared might try to do to Wolf-Jake… and whether or not Wolf-Jared was strong enough to win.

Before he could contemplate their next movement, Wolf-Jared and Wolf-Chad were sprinting forward and Wolf-Jake and Co. were retreating. A choked expulsion of breath whooshed from his chest as Jensen fell forward on to his knees, wanting to call out to Jared and tell him not to give chase, because what if it was a trap?

It took Jensen a second to realize that the Chris-Wolf was still there. The coppery animal wasn’t facing him, but it stood in front of him in a protective way that he couldn’t have mistaken as anyone else’s. His muscles were tensed and coiled underneath his fur as he darted his gaze from side to side, raising his muzzle in the air. Jensen instinctively knew Chris was looking for trouble, the boy’s first reflex to protect Jen. The familiar gesture actually made Jensen relax enough to roll his eyes at the inherent big brother that resided within his best friend.

When, Jensen assumed, he had finally deemed everything safe, Chris shifted back, long limbs and hair taking the place of the creature, so if Jen had missed it before, he definitely hadn’t now. He averted his eyes at Chris’ semi-nudity; he most certainly didn’t need to know it, but he couldn’t help noting that Chris was not a boxers guy, but a briefs guy.

“I, uh…I’m decent.” The rough voice seemed tentative and pained, and Jensen experienced a moment of panic at the thought that he’d gotten hurt without Jensen even seeing it. The thought spurred him on to stride purposefully to his best friend, now clad in the jeans he’s seemed to have taken off before shifting, and who seemed to be bracing himself.

Jensen stopped short, ice blanketing his heart as he recognized the motion as one he used to do a lot until he’d met Jared and Chris and the gang. He touched two fingers to Chris’ wrist, happy that no flinch accompanied this motion. No abuse, then, probably. In his worry for the boy, it didn’t matter to him that Chris wasn’t all human, because Chris was still Chris, his best friend, just like Jared was
still his boyfriend. “Why do you think I’m about to hit you?” he asked gently, eyes wide with concern.

Chris’ eyes mirrored the action. “You’re *not*?” he asked incredulously. “I kept all this a secret, on my behalf and on Jared’s, I lied about it, I wasn’t planning on telling you…and you’re *not* going to deck me?”

“I could never hurt you!” Jensen protested indignantly. He thought on Chris’ confession. “And I guess I’m hurt you wouldn’t have come to me, but I think I can understand why. It’s not only your secret to tell, and I’m not entirely sure I would have believed any of it, had I not just seen it.”

Chris stared at him for a minute, dumbfounded. “You’re awful understanding about this all,” he managed to get out eventually. Jensen flinched, knowing that he was keeping his thoughts at bay, trying to make sure he didn’t completely freak out. Once he did, he would need to have a long talk with Jared, but the more immediate concern at the moment was making sure none of them were hurt.

“I’m sure it’ll hit me later,” Jensen nodded thoughtfully, turning serious at the more pressing matter, “but right now my boyfriend is chasing a manic wolf and I’m terrified he’s going to get hurt. We need to go after them.” He started to move, only to be pulled back by his jacket sleeve by Chris. He huffed in annoyance, shaking off the hold and pouting even though he was aware of how little this helped his case.

“You want to *go after* Jared?” he asked in amazement. Jensen bristled, crossing his arms as anger burned in his chest.

“He’s still susceptible to injury, he’s still Jared, and he’s still mine.” Jensen aimed a glare at the other boy. “I swear, Chris…if you tell me not to go after him…I love you, man, but I swear to God, I will kick your ass.”

Chris huffed out a disbelieving breath, the slightest, awed smile finding its way to his lips. “Ok,” he nodded in astonishment. “Ok.”

###

By the time they’d found Jared and Chad, Jensen was a nervous wreck. He was fairly certain his overtaxed imagination had come up with every possible combination of every factor that could have resulted in Jared being hurt or…or worse.

Of all places, they were on the football grounds at school, deserted as it was on a Friday night. Jared was still in his wolf form and huddled in a ball in the middle of the field and Chad was sitting on the bleachers, looking worn and tired, his usually cocky smile nowhere to be seen. He started when he saw Jensen and Chris approaching, and as much as Jen wanted to run to the mass of fur curled up on the field, he also knew that they didn’t need an audience for the conversation they needed to have.

“Is he hurt?” Jensen demanded in a hushed whisper as soon as they were in Chad’s earshot. “Are you hurt?”

“We’re both fine,” Chad dismissed, looking at Jensen with his blue eyes opened wide. “And you…you’re here.”

“Of course I am.” He gave Chad a one-armed hug, thumping him on the back. “Chris will fill you in, but right now, I think Jared and I need to be alone.”

“Maybe you both need some time,” Chad hedged, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth in a gesture so unlike him that Jensen had to smile. “Don’t do anything rash, Jense, you might think
“I’m not going to hurt him, Chad,” Jensen soothed. “I just want him to stop hurting.”

Chad hesitated a second before nodding and handing Jensen a pair of Jared’s jeans. They turned to leave and Jensen made his way across the field, shivering slightly in the cold night air. The huge wolf picked his head up as Jensen approached, and he wondered whether Wolf-Jared could smell him, or whether Human-Jared could sense him. Those thoughts left his mind when the wolf began to whimper lightly, lowering his head to the ground between his big paws. Jensen could hear the break in it and it tore him apart.

“Hey,” he soothed unthinkingly, reaching out a hand and moving forward slowly. “Jay…please, Jay, it’s just me, I…I’m not going to…do you even understand me?” he wondered out loud, unsure how to approach the subject.

The wolf’s head dipped slightly then came back up in an approximation of a nod. Jensen huffed out a small breath. “God, this is so bizarre…”

Wolf-Jared whimpered again and Jensen cursed his big mouth. “No, Jay…please, babe, let me just…” He thought that he should feel ridiculous, talking to the bear-sized wolf in front of him, but surprisingly, he didn’t.

Even as logic rebelled against him, his heart only saw his hurting boyfriend.

The wolf stilled, and Jensen suspected this was the best he was going to get until he told Jared that he wasn’t here to break up with him, as he was sure the wolf thought.

And wasn’t that just the weirdest thought in the world?

“We need to talk face-to-face, Jay,” he murmured, getting on to his knees and holding out the jeans hopefully. “Please?”

After a minute, the massive wolf transformed into his boyfriend. This time, Jensen watched as every limb grew out, the fur seemed to sink into his skin and his face morphed into human form. Wordlessly, he held the jeans out, and Jared quickly changed into them, still not talking or looking at him.

“Jared…” he tried to start, but was shocked into silence when Jared abruptly dropped to his knees next to Jensen, gripping his forearms and looking into his eyes with the desperation of a drowning man, tears shining there and slipping down his cheeks.

“Jen, baby, please…I just…I’m sorry, I mean, please don’t…” he mumbled brokenly, and Jensen’s heart broke all over again. He squeezed Jared’s arms, forcing him to quieten down.

“Jay, you gotta listen to me, okay?” he said gently. “It’s my turn to talk first.”

Jared seemed to deflate at this, curling into himself. Jensen sat on the field cross-legged and pulled on Jared’s arm to get him to open up a little. The hazel-eyed boy looked up, sorrow radiating from him.

“Jen, you gotta listen to me, okay?” he said gently. “It’s my turn to talk first.”

Jared seemed to deflate at this, curling into himself. Jensen sat on the field cross-legged and pulled on Jared’s arm to get him to open up a little. The hazel-eyed boy looked up, sorrow radiating from him.

“Jay,” he started, some of his earlier worry springing to his mind. “First of all, you cannot just sprint away from me then go missing for hours. I’m getting real tired of that little trick. I was worried sick that Jake and his minions might have hurt you! Do you have any idea how close to crazy I came, looking for you?” He kept his chiding gentle as he checked Jared over for any injuries, letting out a small sigh of relief when he found none. He cradled Jared’s hand loosely in his own, taking a deep breath in preparation of everything he was about to say.
“I’m sorry,” Jared mumbled in a small voice, rivulets of tears cascading down his cheeks. Sighing, Jensen thumbed at the moisture tenderly, his heart overpowering his mind once more.

“Jared, you should have told me something,” he stated quietly. “Keeping this a secret from me was the worst possible thing you could have done. That I had to find out like that, I think, hurt me even more than knowing that you’re…” Jensen hesitated to find the right word. “Different.”

“You think I’m a monster,” Jared whispered hollowly. “This is why I didn’t…”

“Whoa,” Jensen stopped him, frowning slightly. “I don’t think you’re a monster.”

“You don’t even know what to call me,” Jared pointed out miserably.

Jensen nodded. “That’s because I don’t want to offend you. Jake, yeah, him I’d call a monster, but seeing you on the field before you…changed, I would have called you an overgrown puppy.” Jared’s head lifted, an expression crossed between hopeful and scowling caught on his face. Jensen snickered lightly. “See what I mean?”

“Jen,” Jared shook his head desperately, “I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you so badly. But I was just…God, I was terrified. The very idea that you wouldn’t want to see me again, the thought that you’d look at me and see a monster…it was more than I could take. You have to know, though, that I never meant for you to find out like that! Never! I would never want you to be afraid. I was going to tell you everything tomorrow, I just…” his breath hitched as he squeezed his eyes shut, “I just wanted one more night, if you were going to leave me.”

“But Jay, you haven’t given me the chance to react,” Jensen objected softly, not trying to hurt him, but trying to make him see. “Every day that you didn’t tell me, you took that choice away from me.”

Jared seemed to crumble in on himself, even as he nodded slightly. “I understand,” he whispered. Jensen sighed cavernously, wondering where all his common sense had gone. Because to him? Jared was Jared. It killed Jensen that no normal reaction was forthcoming from him, but his heart was just sort of saying “Oh, so he’s a wolf? That’s cool. Does this rule out date night on days with a full moon?”

“You obviously don’t understand,” he contradicted softly, catching Jared’s chin between his fingers and lifting his face to meet his eyes. “I don’t understand why, and I don’t understand why I’m not hightailing it across the Pacific by now, but I don’t care that you’re a werewolf.”

The overwhelming feeling of rightness that washed over him at the absolute, naked truth in those words, almost made him miss Jared’s eyes widening comically.

“What do you mean?” he asked quietly.

Jensen shrugged helplessly. “It makes absolutely no sense to me either, but I only feel like I need to be bothered by the wolf-thing because logic dictates I should be. But there is no part of me that feels like you’re any different. What I feel for you? It’s not defined by what you look like, by what form you’re in. To me, you’re still Jared.”

Jensen took one of Jared’s hands in both of his own, playing with it in his lap. “You know, I think you and me together had kind of made me stronger.”

“How so?” Jared asked, as if he were in some kind of trance.

“Well,” Jensen thought, “I wouldn’t have been able to stand up to Sandy and Jake if they hadn’t...
have messed with you… and I never knew I could ever trust a guy the way I trust you… and also, I’ve almost never been strong enough to listen to my heart. And yet here I am.”

“But… I’m not human, Jen,” Jared said in confusion, the briefest flickering of hope lightening his darkened eyes. “How can you trust me and feel safe around me when I’m not even human? It’s the main problem with Were-Human relationships.”

“Adam is a human,” Jensen shrugged, trying to put into words the distinction he felt was important. “He damn near killed me. There is not a snowball’s chance in hell that I feel safer with him than I do with you.” Jensen brought the hand he was holding up to his lips, pressing a light kiss against Jared’s knuckles, letting go of some of his anger at the obvious agonizing Jared had put himself through trying to find a way around this. “I feel safer with you than I do with anyone else in the world,” he admitted. “There are a lot of things I don’t know about all of this, but one thing I know I’ll never have to question, is how safe I am when I’m with you. You’ll never hurt me, not intentionally.”

Jared’s eyes widened in anticipation as he leaned forward and cradled Jensen’s face between his massive palms. “I need you to tell me, Jen,” he said desperately. “I need you to say the words.”

Jensen closed his eyes briefly before lifting them to meet Jared’s. He put his hands on top of his boyfriend’s and licked his lips once, unconsciously.

“I’m not in love with Jared, the buff, lean, floppy haired, hazel eyed boy straight off the cover of a magazine,” he said steadily, tightening his hold on Jared’s hands so that he wouldn’t pull away. “I’m in love with Jared the protector, and Jared the caregiver. I’m in love with Jared the sweetheart, Jared the team player, Jared the best friend and Jared the poet. I’m in love with your soul. No strings, no conditions, no matter what. The only thing that’s changed, is that I’m now in love with a half-human, half-werewolf, fully-amazing guy who gives new definition to the phrase one in a million. I’m in love with you.”

~*Jared*~

His heart stopped beating and the world around him narrowed down to the face cradled in his hands.

*Jensen loved him.*

Jensen loved him.

*Jensen loved him.*

Jensen was in love with him!!!

“You… you’ve never said that to me before,” he choked out, eyes burning as he stroked Jensen’s cheek and smoothed back his hair, anything as an excuse to touch his mate’s face.

“I guess I haven’t,” Jensen whispered, enchanting green eyes seeming to wrap Jared in happiness and comfort.

“I love you too, Jen,” he breathed, uncaring of the tears they were both shedding now. “God, I love you too, baby, I love you so damn much.”

He leaned forward, and just before their lips touched, Jensen murmured, “You still have a lot of explaining to do.”
“I know.”

Their lips brushing against each other’s now, “And don’t think you’re forgiven for everything just yet.”

“Never.”

Jared landing the smallest of kisses on Jensen’s slowly responding lips. “And don’t think that just because I love you, that means…”

“I love you too.” Jared claimed his mate’s lips roughly, swallowing the moans he made and pulling Jensen on top of him as he sank backwards, quickly plastering Jen’s body against his own. He nibbled Jensen’s bottom lip, licking into his mouth when the boy’s moans gave him access. He sucked Jensen’s tongue and slipped his hand into the smaller boy’s back pocket, groping his ass hard while he rolled his hips upwards.

“Jay…” Jensen moaned as their hardening crotches brushed teasingly against each other. “Please…”

As if Jared needed any more encouragement. He rolled them over, being sure not to press his whole weight against Jensen, and divested his mate of his shirt, leaning down immediately to latch his mouth over one dusky pink nipple and gather Jensen’s wrists in his hands. He nibbled and sucked and kissed and licked until Jensen was a writhing mass underneath him and his nipple was a hard nub, before switching over to the other one and showering it with the same attention, still not relinquishing his grip on Jensen’s wrists.

Jensen was jerking his hips up mindlessly by now, his breath coming out in these sharp needy little sounds that were driving Jared mad. He crushed his mouth against Jen’s again, fucking his tongue in and out of it in a dirty demonstration of what he really wanted to do. He left Jensen’s mouth and trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down his mate’s body as his hands busied themselves unbuttoning Jensen’s jeans. When he reached Jensen’s navel, he glanced up and saw Jen’s head thrown back in pleasure and his wrists exactly where he had left them, a gesture of submission that hardened Jared’s cock even more. He carefully pulled Jensen’s jeans off, trailing kisses down his left leg as he did so and coming back up by kissing a trail up his right leg.

He sucked the skin of Jensen’s inner thigh into his mouth, biting and sucking until a dark mark was left there. He growled in pleasure, loving Jensen marked all over his neck, torso and thighs as his. Jensen’s cock was straining against his underwear, a damp spot where pre-come had seeped through, and Jared was overcome by desire.

“So hard for me, Jen,” he groaned as he peeled his mate’s underwear down and his cock sprung up, curving towards his belly. “Just for me?”

“Only you, Jay,” Jensen moaned breathily, rotating his hips enticingly. “Only ever you.”

Jared’s inner Alpha growled in pleasure. “Can I taste you, baby?” he asked, his voice a guttural wreck. “I want to suck you, need to taste…”

“Oh, God, please,” Jensen whimpered. “Jesus, fuck, Jared, please…”

Jared dipped his head and ran his tongue along the vein on the underside of Jensen’s hot length, coming up to delve his tongue into the slit, reveling at the musky, salty-sweet taste that burst across his tongue. Jensen’s hips shot up of their accord, his strangled gasp resonating loudly in the otherwise quiet grounds. Jared pressed down on Jensen’s hips with his hands, pinning him there while he took the top of Jen’s cock gently into his mouth, suckling sweetly and occasionally
tonguing the slit. He bobbed his head up and down, coaxing more of his mate’s thick length into his
mouth and enjoy the keening sounds coming from him.

Squeezing his hips once in warning, Jared eased his hands off his mate, humming in pleasure when
Jensen stayed put. With one hand, he reached up to tweak Jensen’s nipples in time with his sucking,
the other hand going to fondle his balls. Jensen panted wildly, moaning Jared’s name.

“Jay, Jay, Jay, oh God, oh, fuck, Jay!”

He pulled off Jensen’s cock slowly, smirking when he whimpered at the loss of contact. “You liked
that, Jen?” he asked, his voice rough and low as his hand took his mouth’s place, slowly stroking
Jensen’s dick. “I did. You looked so sexy for me, begging me to keep sucking you. You taste so
good, baby, I wanted to keep sucking you until you came down my throat, but then I wouldn’t get to
do this.”

Without warning, he delved the hand that was wet from stroking Jensen’s shaft between his ass
cheeks, dipping one finger teasingly into his mate’s hole.

“Jay!” Jensen screamed, coming off the ground, exploding as he came all over himself and Jared.
Jared massaged his rim and cock through his orgasm, muttering inanely about how fucking sexy he
looked. When he’d ceased spasming, Jensen finally took his wrists from their position above his head
and pressed his palm directly over the hard bulge of Jared’s jeans. Jared moaned, jerking his hips into
the contact slightly.

Jensen flipped them over, straddling Jared’s legs as he reached his hand down Jared’s jeans. Jared
groaned, knowing that a hand-job was the furthest they could go if Jared didn’t want to knot Jensen
yet. He reached up and grasped Jensen’s ass again, spreading him open wide and fingering his hole
again. Jensen threw his head back and moaned like a porn star, grinding down at the same time that
he wrapped his hands around Jared’s huge member. He jacked slowly upwards, rubbing the slit with
his thumb and spreading the pre-come there, before bringing the thumb to his mouth and sucking it
provocatively.

“Fuck, baby,” Jared breathed. “Such a little slut for me…bet you want more of that, huh? Bet you
wish I was going to put my big cock up your tight little ass.” Jared pushed one finger slowly in,
demonstrating his point as Jensen let out a breathy, needy little keening sound. “Fuck, baby, you
look fucking fine like this,” he growled lustfully. “You look so perfect just like this, fuck, you’d look
even better bouncing off my cock. You want that, baby? You want to ride my dick? Want to bounce
on my lap until you come untouched?”

“Fuck, yes, Jay.” Jensen cried grinding harder down, a light sheen of sweat glistening over his naked
body. “I want to ride you, then I want you to fuck me hard and fast and dirty, take me deep, then I
can suck you clean.”

“Ngh, yeah, Jensen baby,” Jared moaned, bucking his hips upwards, pressing against Jensen’s
hands. Jen ducked down and pulled away Jared’s jeans and briefs. He lifted his head to see Jensen
wrapping those sinfully plump, cock-sucking lips around the head of his shaft and the sight made
him come undone.

“I’m coming, Jen!” he managed to groan out a warning before he was shooting his load. Their chests
and thighs were hit with ropes of white cum, and for coming without a knotting, Jared had to admit
that was pretty fucking fantastic. He groaned when Jensen dipped his head, beginning to lick the
cum off his chest with sexy little kitten licks that had his dick twitching desire pooling low in his
stomach once more.
Knowing that a second time around, he wouldn’t be able to keep from knotting Jensen, Jared flipped them back over, uncaring for their stickiness as he claimed Jensen’s mouth in a tender kiss. “I love you so much, Jen.”

“I love you, Jay,” his mate replied, sounding soft and sleepy. After a few beats, his eyes fluttered open and warm emerald eyes locked on to him, filling him with its love. “We need to get cleaned up, talk about…well, everything, and sleep.” Jensen punctuated his statement with a huge yawn before adding, “Not necessarily in that order.”

“Where should we go?” Jared asked dubiously, wondering whether Jensen’s dad was still out of town on business, knowing that his were not. They couldn’t go to Chad’s, because his best friend would never let him live it down, and because Mrs Murray would feel obligated to fill his parents in, and Jared cringed at the possibility of going to Chris’ like this. The other alpha was likely displeased with him for worrying Jen, and for landing them both in hot water by not saying something sooner, so he was content to wait to see Chris until Jen would be with them the entire time, and possibly several other witnesses.

“You have spare clothes in your football locker, and we’ll use the towels too,” Jensen stretched, distracting Jared with the sumptuous view it provided.

“Um, Jen?” he finally snapped back to attentiveness. “Generally on a Friday evening, being that there’s no school on Saturdays, they tend to lock the place up. Climbing over the wall to get to the grounds was one thing, but there’s locks on all the doors.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Jensen grinned, pulling on his still-clean jeans and leaving them unbuttoned as he begun to walk towards the locker rooms. Jared tucked himself back into his own jeans and followed suit, brow wrinkled in confusion. “There’s no alarms in there right?” Jensen threw over his shoulder.

“Nu-uh,” Jared shook his head, “but just for clarity’s sake, I’d like to repeat that there is a lock.”

Jensen chuckled lightly, and Jared took the moment to bask in the sound. Not for the first time that night, he thanked every God and star that Jensen had blown his mind out of the park and reacted in a way Jared could only have dreamt he would. He had been certain he was going to lose the love of his life; when he had seen Jensen walking up to him and ask him to talk face-to-face, he felt sure he was facing losing his mate forever. Now that he knew he hadn’t, he felt on top of the moon! And Jensen had told him he loved him! Screw the moon; Jared was positively flying.

Did it get better than this?

With Jensen at his side, it just might.

~*Jensen*~

Walking was quite a monumental task when all your limbs felt like jelly. Jensen soldiered on, intent on getting them cleaned up, because as understanding as he was being about this whole…wolf, thing, he thought he deserved a lot of clarity on the matter, not to mention the fact that a little information would go a long way towards calming the panic attack that he just barely kept at bay every time he thought long enough of the surreal reality they were floating in.

“You’re going to explain everything once we’re done here, right?” Jensen confirmed, keeping his voice level.
“Whatever you want to know, I’ll tell,” Jared promised, finally coming into step next to him. His boyfriend smiled brightly at him, and suddenly, things didn’t seem all that scary anymore. “I’m so happy to be able to talk to you about it now,” he grinned, actually bouncing in his steps a little, and Jensen mentally concluded that his boyfriend really was an overgrown puppy. “Thank you so much for all of this, Jen,” Jared turned serious, hazel eyes shining in a way that reminded Jensen exactly why he’d chosen to listen to his heart. “You have no idea how much it means to me that you’re willing to give us a chance after all this. I honestly was terrified that you’d never want to see me again.”

Jensen thought about all the events leading up to that moment and reached out to take Jared’s hand in his own. “You have your own point,” he admitted carefully. “I don’t know how I would have reacted in a different situation, but the adrenaline at the time sort of kick-started my mind-boggling epiphany that you were still my Jay, wolfy or otherwise.”

“I like being yours,” Jared mumbled, pulling Jensen until he was tucked into his side. “And I like you being mine even more.”

“Hey, I may be very understanding about the magnitude of the secret you were keeping,” Jensen poked Jared’s ribs playfully, “and it may be that you were in a tough position. You’re still, however, going to be doing a hell of a lot of groveling, mister.”

“Yes, dear,” Jared teased, kissing the top of his head while he laughed. As they approached the locked doors, Jensen reached down, pulling his left pant leg up to reveal a stitched in little pocket. Jared frowned in puzzlement as his mate took out two bobby pins from the secret little pocket.

“It helps to always be prepared,” Jensen defended, seeing the confusion on Jared’s face.

“What a good little boy scout,” Jared grinned. Jensen’s next comment, however, accompanied with a most saucy grin, had him groaning out loud.

“I was too naughty to be a boy scout.”

“Fuck, Jen,” he moaned throatily. “You’re making it very hard for me to have any sort of self-restraint.”

Jensen grinned mischievously at him and Jared smacked his ass playfully. Kneeling down, Jensen positioned the bobby pins in the locks and in under 30 seconds, there was a soft, unmistakable snick as the lock popped open.

“That was almost embarrassingly easy,” Jensen scoffed, while Jared just gaped. His mate grinned at him again. “Might I just repeat; 17 years of history before you guys knew me. I wasn’t always the Jen you know, Jay.”

This statement was delivered with a tone a little too aloof for Jared’s comfort. He got the feeling that Jen wasn’t as comfortable with that fact as he made out to be, but he thought now was the worst time in the world to push his mate.

They entered the locker rooms and cleaned up quickly, Jensen swatting away Jared’s wandering hands with playful grins every time he got side-tracked. Before long, they were out of the school yards and walking to Jensen’s house, which was still, to Jared’s worry, empty.

A comfortable silence had descended upon them as they walked, Jensen tucked into Jared’s side to stave off the crisp air. His mate was practically falling asleep on his feet as he walked, too stubborn to speak up, so Jared simply held as much of him as he could.
Once they’d reached the driveway, Jen was fighting to keep his eyes opened. He blearily tried to open the door, and Jared smiled indulgently as he took the key away and did it himself. As it opened, he bent down to lift Jensen into his arms, cradling him lovingly. Jensen immediately snuggled into his chest, and was asleep before Jared could kick the door closed. He ascended the stairs with ease, his mate barely a weight in his arms, and angled his mate with profound tenderness into his bed, covering him with the quilt.

Jen reached up blindly for him, pulling him down to lie next to him. Jared’s heart sang with happiness as he spooned Jensen to him, nuzzling his face into the crook of his mate’s neck, pressing light kisses there.

“I love you, Jen, more than the moon and the stars,” he promised in a whisper. Jared’s heart shone when Jensen surprised him, mumbling back his response.

“I love you too, Jay, forever and always.”

They were together.

They were okay.

They weren’t lost.

Everything was going to work out.

Our talk could wait till morning, he figured, snuggling closer to Jen.

Jared fell asleep with his mate in his arms.

###

Chapter End Notes

There! I'd like to reiterate, I was terrified posting this chapter, and I hope that I didn't disappoint. I just figured that Jensen needed to be shown as strong, and what better way than to have inhuman faith in him and Jared?
Also, I know the almost-smut was frustratingly close, but I have something bigger planned for their first time! Bear with me!
Hope you guys liked it! -JayGirl
Jensen woke with a violent start, bolting upright and rousing Jared in the process. Fear numbed his body and he felt like a deer caught in the headlights when the voice boomed again, closer now.

"Jensen!"

Fear clogged up his throat and his breath came out in sharp, choppy pants at the familiar voice. "Jared, you have to hide," he choked out, pushing at his boyfriend's body. "Now!"

"Jen come on," Jared wheedled, "don't you think it's about time your dad found out about us? I really wanna meet him."

"No!" Jensen all but yelled. "Just trust me, and hide! And whatever happens, don't come out until I tell you to!"

"Are you embarrassed of me or something?" Jared demanded, hurt flashing through his puppy-dog eyes.

"No!" Jensen denied in frustration, trying to keep a handle on his temper. "It has nothing to do with you! He just...he won't...he might..."

"Jen, listen to me," Jared began to argue, only to be cut off abruptly by the door swinging viciously open to reveal Eric, foaming at the mouth and wielding some or other weapon. Jensen's breath caught in his throat as he instinctively threw his body forwards, moving in front of Jared protectively.

"I knew it!" he bellowed. "I knew you were going behind my back, sneaking around, dirtying my house! I'll teach you a fucking lesson, boy!"

Jensen yelped and curled into a ball as Eric lunged at him, striking him over and over with what felt like a leather whip. "Please, no Dad, please stop, I'm so-sorry!" he sobbed, barely cognizant of the yells coming from his father and boyfriend.
“Get the fuck off of me, you little bastard!” Eric yelled, and Jensen lifted his face to see Jared pulling his foster father back, murderous intent on his face, clear as day. Eric swung the whip around and caught Jared across the face, drawing blood.

“No!” Jensen was on his feet before he could think about it. Blood oozed from him and he could barely stand, but he couldn’t just stand there and let Jared get hurt. “Leave him alone!”

“You’re talking back to me for him?” Eric screamed, his face turning a spectacular shade of red. “You feeling so much for your little fuck-buddy, then fine, I’ll leave him alone, then.”

Eric advanced towards Jensen and he could barely let out a whimper before Eric had him in a chokehold, the whip wrapped vice tight around his neck. He grabbed frantically at it, tearing at the skin of his throat to try and get a grip on it. Choking and flailing, his vision beginning to blur and his lips turning blue, he barely made out Jared’s form in the mirror, sneaking up behind Eric.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t the only one who saw it.

Eric let go suddenly and Jensen gasped in grateful lungfuls of breath, wheezing and coughing violently. He could only watch helplessly from the floor as Eric swung a meaty fist that connected with Jared’s jaw. Jared stumbled backwards and tripped on his shoes, falling to the floor and hitting his head on the corner of the dresser on the way down. There was a sickening crunch and thud with the impacts that made Jensen’s heart seize up in terror.

“NO!!” he screamed hoarsely, uncaring of how much pain his throat was in. He scrambled to Jared’s prone form and choked on a sob when he saw the pool of blood at Jared’s head. His boyfriend was unmoving and Jensen pressed a trembling hand to the pulse point in his throat.

Ice cold and still as death.

“No, no, no…” he moaned brokenly, pulling at Jared until he was draped across his lap. Desperately, he pulled back Jared’s eyelid.

A glassy, hazel eye stared back at him.

He broke down, sobbing uncontrollably over Jared’s still body. “You killed him!” he screamed, out of his mind with heartbreak. “You killed him, you killed…”

“You killed him!” Eric bellowed. “You killed him just like you killed Jody and just like you killed your own parents! You kill everyone you love, you’re nothing but a curse!”

“No!” Jensen whimpered. “No, I didn’t! I mean, I didn’t…didn’t mean to…I…loved them all…”

“And you killed them,” Eric hissed. “Everyone around you dies!”

“No…” Jensen sobbed, clutching at Jared like this would somehow bring his boyfriend back. Suddenly, underneath his arms, skin became fur.

He looked up to find Wolf-Jared growling at him, eyes a deep red that was far from the hazel he had seen before.

_Not Jared anymore,_ he realized. _Just wolf._

He let out a piercing scream as the wolf attacked.
Jensen sucked in a breath, eyes snapping open, immobilized with residual terror. His heart was pounding in his ears and his blood was roaring, his cheeks streaked with tears.

*Just a nightmare.*

A horrible, terrible nightmare.

Jensen woke up slowly, still spooned snugly against Jared, warm and close, and that was about where the good feelings ended. Terror still shook his heart and despite Jared’s warmth pressed close to him, he could still feel the phantom iciness of his boyfriend’s skin under the pads of his fingers. Ghost pains burned his throat as he sucked in breaths, panting as though he’d run 10 miles, and he cleared it, shifting slightly.

“Jen?” Jared mumbled, rousing a little. “You okay, baby?”

“I’m okay, Jay, go back to sleep,” Jensen soothed, seeing that it was still dark out. He must’ve only slept about two hours, and he stomached lying to Jared with the knowledge that he wanted his boyfriend to rest some. “I’m just going to get some water.”

Jared nodded sleepily, turning around and huddling back to sleep. Some of the frozen spikes of fear in his heart melted at the sight and he leaned in to press a kiss to the nape of Jared’s neck, silently taking comfort and welcoming the crushing relief at the warmth that greeted his lips.

He slipped out of bed, taking his cellphone with him. Eric had been gone for about a week now, and as much as he loved the reprieve it gave him, it had also begun to worry Jensen a little. Not only about the possibility of Eric finding him the way he did in the nightmare, but begrudgingly enough, also worry that he might have gotten into some kind of trouble. There was really only a handful of places he would go…Jensen had visited the local bars during the week, had checked in at Eric’s work and the Sunday after this one was Jody’s birthday anniversary and while it was early to have made a trip back home, he couldn’t rule it out either.

Hating how in the dark he felt, he punched in a number that he didn’t think he’d ever use again.

*“Cold Oaks, this is Dodge.”*

“C’mon, Al,” he smirked at the familiar tone. “You can’t tell me Dodge actually caught on since I left.”

“J-Ross!” Aldis whooped enthusiastically. Jensen actually managed a chuckle at the old nickname; he was pretty sure his old friends were the only ones who incorporated his middle name into the nickname they’d found for him. *“My man! How’s the new digs treating you?”*

“Same shit, different area code, man,” Jensen grinned to himself, wondering how his friend would react the werewolf bombshell. “How’s The Oaks been holding up since I skipped town?”

“Good, man,” Aldis laughed. *“Folks can actually come around and shoot some pool now that our resident shark up and left. My profits are riding the fumes, JR, riding the fumes!”*

“You can say it, Al,” Jensen replied, pausing dramatically. “You guys miss me hardcore. I don’t blame you, I was always the gang’s main heavyweight.”

“Fuck you,” Aldis chuckled fondly. *“We do miss you man,”* he admitted warmly. *“All of us do.”*
The emotion from the usually tough-as-nails barman caught Jensen unawares and he swallowed the lump rising in his throat. Sure, he wasn’t all happy about the guy he had been at that time of his life, but he couldn’t deny he’d made some actual friends in the rush. He felt a rush of guilt at not bothering to contact them.

“I miss everyone too,” he finally responded, smiling bittersweet. “I especially miss the free shooters,” he grinned slyly, and his remark had the desired effect as Aldis bellowed a laugh.

“Y’little bitch. What brings your voice to the other end of my very blown-up telephone, man?”

“Just checking if my old man’s been frequenting the usual joints,” he replied casually, slipping easily back into the Jensen that existed Pre-Jared, guarded and cool. “You still got your ear on the ground floor?”

“Damn straight,” Aldis confirmed. “I heard some whispers around town…aint heard nothin’ concrete yet, but I’ll give you a call if I do.”

“Preciate it, Al,” he nodded, rubbing his hand over his tired face. Back to the waiting game.

“You okay, man?” Aldis asked cautiously. “Somebody givin’ you trouble there?”

Jensen hid his chuckle with a cough. Not only was the idea of somebody troubling him with Jared and Chris around downright laughable, but also, were all his friends always this overprotective, or had Chris started a chain reaction? Because, God, he’d never noticed this before.

“Naw, man,” he refuted, smiling affectionately. “They know they need to back off.”

Aldis whistled low, and Jensen could hear the smirk in his voice. “Your reputation precede you or something?”

“Or something,” Jensen agreed cryptically, smiling to himself. He hung up on his friend after a few more minutes of talking, with the promise to visit should he ever choose to, quote unquote, slum it up again.

He felt a little more in control knowing that there had been talk about Eric being back home. With Aldis, he’d soon learned, the man always hedged his bets, so if he told you something might be true, it was likely a soon-to-be documented fact. He hoped to hell he wouldn’t have to go back there…but then, Jen had always been a realist, and in the spirit of that, he’d resigned himself to the possibility of having to head back. Maybe he’d even swing it so that he could visit his mom’s grave on her birthday. Maybe take some flowers…Jody had loved flowers.

Jensen was so deep in thought that he didn’t notice Jared’s soft footsteps until big arms wrapped around his waist from behind. Jensen tensed for a split second before melting into the embrace and banishing his fear from the nightmare with a squeeze to Jared’s big forearms. Peace settled inside him and he relaxed the fists that he didn’t even know he’d begun clenching. God, they really needed to talk about the wolf thing…

“You didn’t come back to bed,” Jared mumbled, pressing a warm kiss to the sensitive spot beneath his ear. He shivered happily at the touch, a thrill shooting through him at the fact that they were sharing said bed, something he’d neglected to react to in his state of sleepiness.

“Yeah, I needed to call an old friend from back home,” he whispered. Turning around, he thought it best not to volunteer any more information. He wrapped his arms around Jared’s neck and pulled him down for a tender, gentle kiss. His boyfriend tasted of pine and summer rain, and Jensen hummed happily as he pulled away and rested his head on Jared’s chest.
Jared wound his arms around Jensen’s waist, resting his cheek against the top of Jensen’s head. It felt so easy to forget the world and all the real life dramas they had to face…it felt like together, they could face the whole world. Jensen cuddled in Jared’s protective embrace gave him a feeling of safety that he’d never known before. They fit. They clicked. They matched. God, how could Jensen ever not have accepted all of Jared? The only thing he couldn’t accept, was a world where they weren’t together.

“Jen?” Jared’s murmur broke Jensen from his thoughts. He squeezed tighter, pressing a kiss to Jared’s shoulder, bared by his wife beater.

“Mm?”

“What was your nightmare about?” Jared asked in a small voice, hands playing with the hem of Jensen’s t-shirt. “Did I….was it about…”

“Yeah,” Jensen settled for a half-truth, and before he could explain, Jared pulled back, aiming wide hazel eyes at him, filled with pain and desperation.

“Did I…” he choked out. “Did I…hurt…?”

“No,” Jensen answered immediately, firmly. He framed Jared’s face, pressing a sweet kiss to his lips. “I’m just a little disorientated because I know nothing about all of this, but Jay, I meant what I said. In your arms is the safest I’ve ever felt.”

It took a few minutes, but Jensen maintained his eye-contact and the contact between them, and Jared softened, smiling lovingly down at him before butting his nose against Jensen’s temple and licking the underside of his jaw. Pleasant shivers rattled through the smaller boy even as he laughed.

“I feel like I should have known you were a puppy,” he teased, mischief in his eyes. “You’re always doing those wolfy gestures.”

“Pretty hard to suppress sometimes,” Jared admitted with a grin, nuzzling his neck to make a point.

“Don’t want you to suppress,” Jensen sighed happily, little flutters in his chest at the displays of affection. “You’re adorable.”

“My wolf is not adorable!” Jared snapped up and sniffed indignantly, pouting slightly. “I’m an Alpha, Jen, you can’t call me adorable!”

“I don’t know what you mean, so I can call you anything I want, Padalecki,” Jensen retorted around a yawn.

“I’d start explaining, but I think you need more sleep, baby,” Jared smiled fondly. “Back to bed?”

Jensen felt that small thrill shoot through him again as he nodded, yawning again. He let out a yelp as the ground disappeared beneath his feet. Jared lifted him clear off the ground, cradling him with a grin, and Jensen threw his arms around his boyfriend’s neck instinctively.

“Jared, you overgrown puppy, put me down!” he demanded, the effect of his words lost behind the slight huff that accompanied it.

“Call me a fierce wolf,” Jared grinned as he began to walk. Jensen squirmed, laughing breathlessly.

“Mangy mutt!” he retorted with a smirk, once they were in his bedroom.
Jared grinned evilly, and Jensen yelped as he was thrown onto his bed. He laughed loudly as he bounced off the mattress, night terrors and worries about going back to find his father all forgotten as Jared’s smile blazed through him. Without preamble, Jared slipped off his wifebeater and wriggled out his jeans, shifting into a wolf almost flawlessly.

Jensen bit back a gasp of amazement. He had been distracted previously, but now? With the outside world staying firmly there, and the moonlight streaming silver through the window, Jared’s Wolf looked magnificent. Regal. Breathtaking. From the long curve of his back to the proud set of his posture, from the strong graceful limbs to the hazel slanted eyes that seemed to solidify that it was Jared in there…

It was the kind of beauty Jensen had never thought he would experience.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, eyes wide in wonderment. Jared crouched low, his tongue lolling out, looking suddenly playful, and Jensen huffed out a laugh.

‘M gonna getcha, Jen!

Jensen laughed out loud as Jared’s voice manifested in his head, a split second before he realized…Jared’s voice had manifested in his head! He stood there motionless as he comprehended this new piece of information. Was it because he was dating Jared? Or because he knew their secret now?

His thoughts were interrupted when Wolf Jared launched himself on to the bed, pinning Jensen down with a gentleness that belied his size. Jensen laughed again, deciding to just go with the flow as Jared butted his muzzle softly against his cheek. Jared licked his jaw in exactly the same spot, the tenderness in the action only amplified as he was in his wolf form, and Jensen shivered, same as before.

Love you, Jen.

“Love you, Jay,” he replied, and the wolf butted his cheek again, a small rumble going through his chest that sounded suspiciously like a purr. Jared settled himself carefully next to Jensen, resting on his belly and tucking his paws close to himself. Hazel eyes regarded him warmly, even in lupine form seeming to glow with love.

And all at once, Jensen’s brain got with the picture his heart had been painting all along.

Wolf or no…it was his Jared.

There wasn’t an inkling of hesitation in him as Jensen cuddled into the wolf’s soft, warm fur. He could almost feel his boyfriend’s surprised warmth and love at the trusting gesture, the wolf’s relief almost palpable in the air around them. Unconsciously, Jensen petted the fur at the top of the large creature’s spine, just as he would have played with the ends of Jared’s hair. Predictably, the gesture soothed both him, and his wolfed-out boyfriend. Sleep began to tug at the edges of Jensen’s mind, all of his worries and concerns melting into the background.

Sleep, mo chroi. He heard Jared’s tender whisper. Dream sweet, baby. I’ll keep the nightmares away. I’m here now.

And Jensen did, because Jared was.

~*Jared*~
Jared woke up curled around Jensen, unable to tell where he ended and where his mate began.

And what a way it was to wake up.

Somewhere during the night, he’d shifted back to human form and, not wanting Jen to miss the warmth of his fur, Jared had snuggled the other boy close and wrapped them both in a blanket. His heart burned in his chest as he thought back to how Jensen had cuddled into his wolf, making the Alpha in him hum with heady pleasure. It was almost as though Jensen could read his mind last night, laughing at his antics and taking comfort from his unspoken reassurances. He wished, not for the first time, that he could talk in his wolf form, but even without any communication, Jensen seemed to understand what he was doing.

Jen shifted in his sleep, burrowing closer into his chest, and his mate’s proximity and his scent, combined with Jared’s half-undressed state, had his cock twitching in interest.

Jensen ducked his head and his breath ghosted hotly over Jared’s exposed nipple, making the Alpha bite back his groan. He leaned down and nibbled on the top of Jensen’s ear, tracing the shell with his tongue before biting and sucking the earlobe. Jensen squirmed, rolling his hips as he came to awareness.

“Morning,” he greeted, and damn if Jensen’s rough, sleep-addled voice didn’t send need shooting through his body. Jared dipped his head down to capture his mate’s lips in a fierce, claiming kiss, one hand dipping down to tease the edge of Jensen’s sweats waistband. Jensen arched into him slightly, and Jared slipped one muscular thigh between Jensen’s legs, brushing against him teasingly. Jensen panted into the kiss and Jared sucked on his tongue almost lazily.

“Morning, mo ch…baby,” he grinned when he pulled away, burning from the hooded desire blazing in Jen’s green orbs. He’d just managed to stop himself from calling Jensen “mo chroi”, a pet name his grandfather had had for his grandmother that he’d always remembered and thought was sweet. He decided to keep that nickname in his head, at least until Jensen could consciously decide whether he was going to stay with him. He bent to quickly nibble at Jensen’s swollen lower lip. Jensen made a small sound at the back of his throat and Jared swallowed the sounds with another long, deep kiss. As he was exploring the cavern of Jensen’s mouth, something occurred to him and he pulled back slightly.

“There was no good reason in the whole world to stop that,” Jensen groaned theatrically.

Jared chuckled, butting Jensen’s temple with the side of his nose. “Do you remember when we first started texting each other?”

“Hmm…” Jensen pulled slightly back, a thoughtful expression on his face as he absently gnawed on his already red and swollen bottom lip. “You saw a bird’s nest and I had a minor stroke,” he nodded the affirmative. “Go on.”

“Minor stroke?” Jared laughed loudly. “Jen, what are you talking about?”

“I wanted to smash the phone against the wall,” he admitted with a wry grin. “I didn’t know how to reply.”

“So you were gonna smash the phone?” Jared’s body shook with laughter. His apology was on his lips for laughing when suddenly, startlingly warm and loving green eyes locked on to his own hazel pools. His breath caught, and he thanked his stars for leading Jensen into his life. He must have been doing something right to have been given the gift of having the stunning boy in his life.
“It was a better alternative than going on the lam,” Jensen defended, grinning sheepishly as Jared threw his head back in laughter, coming back to the present. “What about that day, anyway?”

Jared got up and fetched his jeans off the floor, wriggling into them. “You still have something to prove to me,” Jared waggled his eyebrows, casting a meaningful grin at Jensen, waiting for him to figure it out.

He could see it when his mate did.

“Oh!” Jensen laughed, eyes crinkling at the corners. “You want me to prove to you that pick-up lines are all about the delivery?”

Jared grinned, nodding as he crossed his arms and waited. “Impress me, Jen,” he challenged playfully.

He would never have been prepared for the way Jensen responded to a challenge.

Moving with a slow, very deliberate grace, Jensen got out of the bed, keeping smoldering emerald eyes locked on Jared the whole time. Jared swallowed hard as he took in the sleep tousled hair, Jensen’s low riding sweats that showed off a teasing strip of his hip bones, and the snug and tight t-shirt that did nothing to hide Jensen’s lean, toned body.

When he finally came to stand in front of Jared, Jen didn’t stop. He kept coming forward, making Jared step back instinctively until his back hit the wall, something he’d never done, but felt compelled to do no, if only to see where Jensen was going with this.

His mate boxed him in, one hand placed on either side of Jared on the wall, and all through this, not once did Jensen’s hooded eyes leave his own. His pulse jumped in his throat.

“Call me Fred Flintstone,” Jen murmured, his voice so dark and deep and sexy that Jared could hardly comprehend the words. “Coz baby, I can make your bed rock.”

In his mind, Jared knew that the line was absolutely ridiculous, but those vibrant eyes that were so full of dark and dirty promises, that low rumble of his voice was as smooth as whiskey but still somehow, as rough as sandpaper, and when Jensen delivered that line with his own teasing little rock of his hips, Jared was fucking done for.

He let out an almost animalistic growl, lust burning through his veins until the need to claim, possess, get drunk off Jensen was the only thing on Jared’s mind. He wrapped his arms around Jensen’s waist and turned them around, slamming Jensen against the wall before he lifted his mate, gripping the back of his thighs to make sure that Jensen wrapped his legs around his waist.

“All about the delivery, huh Jay?” Jensen smirked at him, looping his arms around Jared’s neck.

“Fuck yeah,” Jared groaned, slamming his lips forcefully against Jensen’s, a passionate and frenzied clashing of teeth and tongue, sucking, nibbling, and plundering until he felt inebriated with desire. Walking them backwards over to the bed, Jared let the feel of the bed hit the back of his knees before he fell backwards gently, taking Jensen with him so that the smaller boy didn’t take any impact. He rolled them over, grinding against Jensen with slow movements that were driving them both mad. The green-eyed boy threw his head back with a small moan, exposing his throat in submission and making Jared’s inner Alpha growl with pleasure. Jared kept up his grinding while kissing a trail along the long column of Jensen’s throat. He stopped at the hollow at the base of Jen’s throat, sucking deep and unforgivingly at the sensitive skin, growling as he bit and sucked a deep mark on to pale skin.
“Gonna mark you up so good, Jen,” he promised in dark desire. “Gonna mark you all over, show everyone that you’re fucking mine.”

“Yeah, Jay,” Jensen panted, obviously on board with the possessiveness in the Alpha’s tone. Jared, far from any level of patience by now, ripped Jensen’s shirt right up the middle, moving the material out of the way of his mouth as it descended on golden, freckled skin. Jared traced each little cluster of the adorable freckles, then proceeded to map out Jen’s torso solely with his tongue.

As promised, by the time Jared’s unrelenting mouth reached Jensen’s sternum, the boy was covered in dark marks, writhing in mindless pleasure.

And that was when he saw it.

Jared had never really seen Jensen during the day without his shirt on, and the fairy lights at the clearing that night, and the moonlight on the grounds last night couldn’t have picked up on what he was looking at now. He remained frozen, suspended in the air with his eyes locked on the long, jagged, pale scar across Jensen’s belly.

“Jen?” he whispered hoarsely. “Baby, what…?”

Jensen caught sight of what he was looking at, and Jared knew as soon as Jen’s face burned red, that he was going to try to cover it up and escape. He lowered his body more flush against Jensen in a preemptive move, trapping his wrists in one hand and reaching the other to cradle Jensen’s face.

Jensen’s breath hitched and he closed his eyes. “It was the only time I didn’t suture myself,” he whispered, anguish tainting his tone that ripped apart Jared’s heart. “Adam, he...he, um…he had a knife, and…”

“Oh God,” Jared whispered, horrified, icy cold seeping through his bones as he realized how close he came to losing Jen before he even got to know him. He felt nauseated and terrified, all at the same time. He pressed his forehead against his mate’s, needing to reaffirm their connection, cement the fact that his mate was here, and alive, and okay, and his. He didn’t realize he was tensed and panting slightly until Jensen maneuvered his hands out of Jared’s grasp and wrapped his arms around Jared’s neck, playing with the ends of his hair and rubbing his coiled neck in soothing motions.

“It’s okay, Jay,” Jensen whispered, leaning up to press a kiss to Jared’s still unresponsive lips. “It’s okay, I’m here, I’m alright, we’re both okay…everything is okay. I promise. Shh…”

Jared let his head fall into the crook between Jensen’s neck and shoulders, inhaling his mate’s scent and seeking comfort in the way that he knew he should have been providing.

“How bad was it, Jen?” he asked, his voice shattered. He briefly wondered why he was being such a masochist, but truthfully, he needed to know. He felt nauseated and terrified and desperate, all at the same time. He pressed his forehead against his mate’s, needing to reaffirm their connection, cement the fact that his mate was here, and alive, and okay, and his. He didn’t realize he was tensed and panting slightly until Jensen maneuvered his hands out of Jared’s grasp and wrapped his arms around Jared’s neck, playing with the ends of his hair and rubbing his coiled neck in soothing motions.

“A dull roaring filled his ears and Jared felt like he was choking on his own tongue. “Baby…”

“A dull roaring filled his ears and Jared felt like he was choking on his own tongue. “Baby…”
“Stop. He has no place here, Jay,” Jensen interrupted him, palms framing Jared’s face as his mate synchronized their breathing, waiting for him to follow suit. “This is you and me. He doesn’t belong here.”

Jared nodded jerkily, making a valiant effort in calming himself down and letting explosive relief drown the anguish that flowed through his veins. “I’ve got you,” he murmured, kissing Jensen’s lips softly. “I’ve got you, you’re mine, baby. I’m never gonna let you go and I’m not gonna let him hurt you ever again.” He kissed away the tears falling from Jensen’s eyes, letting his own fall too as he chanted the words inwardly, a constant mantra of a reminder that Jensen was here with him, warm, alive, breathing. He pressed their foreheads together with infinite gentleness, the preciousness of his mate with him something he had neglected to be grateful for and the reality of what could have been impressing itself on him until he was weak with relief. “I’m not gonna let him hurt you ever again,” he repeated, reassuring his mate and himself.

“I know,” Jensen nodded, nuzzling into him, eyes closed like a newborn wolf cub. “I know you won’t.”

The burning need to claim his mate was replaced now, with an even fiercer need to affirm his life. Starting at Jensen’s temple, Jared drew a trail of butterfly kisses, soft nips and sucks down along his jaw, to the corner of his mouth, then trailing a path along his bared throat. He stopped to suckle another bruise on to the juncture between his mate’s neck and shoulders, then continued his path downwards, scraping his teeth along Jensen’s collar bone before suckling each nipple into his mouth, ignoring Jensen’s moans. He strayed from his intended path only long enough to pepper kisses over the spot when his mate’s heart was beating, resting his ear there for a moment to hear and feel the reassuring thumpthump that gave him a reason to keep breathing himself. Finally, he managed to tear himself away from the glorious sound, scraping his teeth over the ridges of Jensen’s lean torso until he came to the scar.

Pressing his hands into Jensen’s hips to hold him in place, Jared mouthed along the scar, kissing, biting, sucking, licking at the physical reminder. He felt Jensen’s belly fluttering under his ministrations, muscles wound tightly to keep from moving. He traced the old wound with his mouth three times, one for each time that he’d almost lost his love.

Finally, he sat back a little, looking at Jensen even as his fingers absently traced the jagged path over and over, as gentle as the breeze created by a butterfly’s wings. His mate was looking at him with tears of wonderment in his eyes.

“You’re not disgusted by it?” he asked in a tiny voice.

“Never,” Jared breathed, crawling back up Jensen’s body to bracket his face with one arm on either side of it, resting against the pillows. “Every inch of you is beautiful, Jen. The scars just add to your beauty because it shows how strong you are- are- for surviving. I love your scars, Jen, because they’re reminders to me that you’re still here. Scarred, but breathing, alive, with me.” He bent down to capture Jensen’s lips in a gentle kiss. “They’re a reminder that I’ve been given a precious chance to have you.”

Jensen’s tears were flowing freely now. “I love you,” he whispered, setting Jared’s heart alight. God, no matter how many times he heard those words, it would never be enough. “I love you so God damned much, Jay, forever and always.”

He smiled at the phrases that were quickly becoming their trademark.

“I love you too, baby,” he whispered. “More than the moon and the stars.”
“Ok, so you’re going to be the head of the pack, because you’re the pack Alpha’s heir, and because your older brother chose to leave the pack for his wife, who was a Beta from another pack,” Jensen clarified as he sprinkled the last of the grated cheese over the lasagna he was making. It seemed that talking over him cooking would become a thing of theirs, since Jensen was calmer when he was multi-tasking and Jared was obligated to remain focused if he wanted any of the delicious smelling meal.

Jared had explained the pack hierarchy as best he could, and already, Jensen felt better knowing something concrete. It didn’t really surprise him that his boyfriend was not only an Alpha, but also the head Alpha; everyone deferred to him most of the time anyway, be it human or wolf.

“Yeah,” Jared nodded his head, bringing Jensen back to their discussion. “Jeff still visits from time to time, but he’s part of his wife’s pack now.”

Jensen furrowed his brow, wondering how to phrase what was on his mind. “Packs aren’t all that different from families, right?”

“Right,” Jared grinned, seeming happy that Jensen had said so. “We’re all a huge family.”

“Then weren’t there people who disagreed or were against Jeff leaving for his wife?” he asked curiously. “I mean, what if some of them viewed it badly?”

“They didn’t,” Jared refuted, “but in the rare case that someone would have disputed me taking Jeff’s place, I would have had to beat them in a formally issued challenge. We would have to fight until one of us surrendered or couldn’t fight anymore.”

Jensen shuddered at the remote possibility of having to see that, glad he didn’t have to. Jared smiled reassuringly when he voiced his thoughts.

“It would never have happened,” he said confidently, shrugging lightly. “Our pack has great respect for mates and mating, and even if someone disagreed with Jeff’s leaving, they would have still been supportive because he was doing it for his mate.”

The word triggered a memory in Jensen, of Jake’s hurled words the previous night. “Tell me about this mate thing,” he requested as he slid the casserole carefully into the oven. “Jake said I was yours?”

Jared blushed, right to the roots of his hair, and Jensen would have laughed if his boyfriend hadn’t looked so uncertain. Pushing back the desire to giggle at the adorable face, Jensen leaned over the kitchen counter, towards Jared, propping himself on his elbows. “Come on, Jay,” he soothed, cocking his head to the side as Jared lifted his eyes to him and mirrored his pose so that they were closer to one another. “I promise, I’m not running.”

Jared took a deep breath, then nodded slightly. “It’s pretty simple to explain,” he mumbled. “As wolves, we believe that we all have one true mate; the one person on the face of the earth perfectly suited for us in every way. Our soul mate, if you will. We believe that we can recognize our mate in a lot of different ways apart from the instant attraction and connection; they have a smell different to anything we’d ever smelt before, for example, and as the mating bond grows, it’s even been said that mate’s can practically tell what their significant other is feeling, or thinking. Not straight out, but they get a flavor of it, in a way. Not many wolves still believe mates exist, because the world is a massive
place, after all, but there are always some of us that spend our whole lives searching and waiting for our mate.”

Jensen would have fallen to his knees if not for the counter propping him up. He was Jared’s mate? It would certainly explain why he could hear Jared’s thoughts. But God, his soul mate? Jensen wasn’t sure why it wasn’t scaring him to be shown the level of commitment Jared was alluding to, but all he felt was humbled, grateful and almost tearful with emotion. He knew that Jared was something special…but his soul mate? Jensen could so get on board with that.

“Do I smell different to you, Jay?” he asked softly, needing the confirmation from Jared instead of Jake. “Am I your mate?”

Jared’s eyes never steered from his. “Yes.”

He needed no more of an invitation.

Crossing around the table, he climbed onto Jared’s lap and caught his lips in a tender, searing kiss that left them both breathless. He felt the tension leave his boyfriend- his mate- in favor of a possessive hunger and euphoria.

“My mate. Mine.” Jared growled against his lips, hands roaming frantically, almost as though he were trying to touch everywhere at once. “My mate. Mine.”

“Yours,” Jensen agreed, elation making his veins sing as he uttered the truth.

He may not have been a were, but Jared was written in his soul and resided in his bones. He understood.

~*Jared*~

Without warning, he hoisted his mate up and set him back down on the edge of the table. Jared quickly stepped between his legs and crashed his mouth to Jensen’s, swallowing the dark blonde’s moans and breathy gasps.

Jared rocked gently into the open V of Jensen’s legs, making the smaller boy throw back his head, submitting his throat with a low whimper. Jared growled in pleasure and nipped a trail along Jensen’s slender neck, leaving bruising marks over the already purpling skin, which didn’t escape Jensen’s notice.

“I’ve got hickeys over hickeys, Jay,” he chided gently, an exasperated smile playing on his lips. Jared retaliated by thrusting his denim-covered cock over Jensen’s and swallowing the answering keens, possessiveness roaring through him at the multitude of feelings and desires.

“Good,” he stated firmly. “Now everyone can see that you belong to me.”

Jensen poked him none too gently, stabbing his finger to Jared’s chest as he narrowed his eyes. “Not that I’m property or anything, am I Jared?” he challenged warningly.

“Not at all, mo chroi,” Jared hastened to agree, an amused smile lighting up his face at his mate’s fire, unwittingly slipping his nickname in.

“Mo chroi?” Jensen’s eyebrows furrowed. “What does that mean? You called me that last night too.”
Jared started in shock. He was sure he’d mind-spoke the words in his wolf form…but he must have been mistaken…

“Mo chroi…it’s a name I remember from my grandparents,” he admitted sheepishly, dismissing his concerns. “It means ‘My heart’.”

Jensen sent him a warm, tremulous smile. “I love it,” he whispered, pressing his lips against Jared’s once more. Jared cradled his mate’s face, petting the side of his neck and nuzzling into his temple when they broke their kiss.

“So…” Jensen continued, pushing away slightly so that he could face Jared. “Who do I know that’s a were? I assume everyone in the gang?”

“Yeah,” Jared nodded. “But they’re the wolves from our pack.”

“There’s more than one pack here?”

“Yeah, at the moment, there’s two,” Jared nodded. “The Padalecki Pack and the Morgan Pack.”

“Wouldn’t there be disputes between the two, for power and land and whatever?” Jen asked, scrunching his nose in thought. “Or are you amicable?”

Jared beamed at his mate’s sharp intuition and observations. “There’s always been a power struggle between our packs,” he confirmed, rubbing gentle circles into Jensen’s hipbones. “We’ve been negotiating a treaty since before I was born, because the thread that stood between us and a pack war was always just the feeble belief and surface bond of the packs that existed between Morgan’s brother and my father. Three years ago, Morgan’s brother died; he was ambushed by what we believe was a traveling pack. Morgan took over as Alpha because his brother had never sired any heirs, and he was always convinced that our pack killed his brother. Ever since, we’ve been teetering on the edge of war, and we seem closer than ever these days.” Jared allowed a small sigh to escape him as the tension from the packlands came back to the forefront of his mind. “Morgan’s always been waiting for one of us to slip up, give him a reason…I worry that his patience might have reached the end of its tether.”

Jensen framed his face, pressing their foreheads together in silent comfort and support. Jared drew strength from the feel of his beloved mate pressed against him, the love almost bursting through his chest from it’s sheer force.

“It’s going to be okay,” Jensen whispered. “You wanna know why?”

“Tell me,” Jared whispered back.

His mate wore a confident smirk, eyes sparkling. “You’re Jared fucking Padalecki,” he grinned arrogantly, making Jared laugh loudly. “You’ve got your family, friends who would die and kill for you, and for whatever it’s worth, you’ve got me too. We’re all right there with you and as long as we’re together, no one can stop us.”

“How in the world did I get so lucky to find you?” he marveled quietly, nuzzling Jensen and licking the side of his neck playfully.

“Funny,” Jensen smiled warmly, “I was just about to ask you the same thing.” The green-eyed boy kissed him quickly once more, before going to check on the lasagna in the oven. “Jay,” he threw over his shoulder as he worked, “I’m gonna go ahead and assume Jake and his friends are part of the Morgan Pack. Anyone else I know?”
“Yeah,” Jared nodded, running through the list in his head before he answered. “Sophia Bush?”

“Holy shit!” Jensen yelped, the shock of the revelation stunning him enough for him to inadvertently touch the burning pan. Jared was next to his mate in the following second, sucking the reddened finger into his mouth, soothing the pain away with small swipes of his tongue. Jensen’s eyes darkened with lust at the picture, and Jared felt himself getting hard at the pretty picture it painted in his head.

Jensen shook his head, seeming to come back to reality. “Looks like me and Chris need to talk about a few things,” he muttered, gently extracting his hand to pull the steaming pasta out of the oven and set it on the cool stovetops.

“How about what?” Jared asked curiously, reaching for the top of the lasagna to scoop a piece of bubbling cheese. Jensen swatted his hand away, glaring at him as he pulled back in shock, automatically pouting.

“You not just see me burn my hand on the steaming hot lasagna?” his mate asked him exasperatedly, a small smile playing on his lips. “Patience is a virtue, Jay.”

“You sound like my mom,” Jared complained good-naturedly. “I bet she’s gonna love you when you meet her this Friday.”

“Your mom… wait, WHAT?”

###

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of y’all wanted to see Eric in this chapter, so I’m so sorry if I disappointed! I have some juicy plans for Jensen and him, though, so stick with me! Also, I went and picked the cheesiest pick-up line for Jen that I could find, but wouldn’t you fold too, if that smoking specimen of man said anything in that voice?!!! Hope y’all enjoyed!

Stay cool! -JayGirl
“Sophia Bush is your mate, isn’t she?”

The words were out of Jensen’s mouth before the door to his best friend’s house was even fully open. Chris stared at him for a moment, slack-jawed, before composing himself.

“So Jared’s told you about the mating stuff then, huh?” he nodded with a small sigh. “Yeah, Sophia’s my mate.”

“I don’t understand,” Jensen stated, furrowing his brow. He ducked under Chris’ arm, heading to the kitchen to leave the Tupperware container of lasagna he’d brought his friend and ignoring Chris’ sarcastic mumbles about being invited in. Judging from the disheveled state of his friend and the light circles underneath murky blue eyes, Chris had only just woken up. He felt badly momentarily, for bombarding his friend, but that emotion was quickly overridden by concern.

“Make yourself at home,” the shorter boy snarked when he entered the kitchen. Jensen smirked as he dished a portion of the food out and put the rest in the refrigerator after taking a quick minute to flip his friend off. Grabbing a fork, he sat at the counter and pushed the plate in front of the chair opposite his, in front of Chris.

“I know you haven’t eaten yet, and God knows you need more balanced foods than you eat now,” he chided gently. He hated the fact that Chris didn’t have the benefit of someone to take care of him, and had taken it upon himself to make sure that Chris, at the very least, ate (mostly) right and applied to colleges and for scholarships. “Now, it’s four pm, and you’ve obviously just woken up. You wanna tell me what kept you up all night?”

Chris flashed him a cocky smirk that held none of its usual affection and sincerity. Just…blank.

“You’re a kinky bastard, aren’t ya Freckles?”

Jensen rolled his eyes, unwilling to let Chris talk his way out of it. “Sure, because hooking up always leaves those shadows in your eyes and of course, you’re always this tense around me. What was I thinking?”

Chris shifted uncomfortably, making no move towards the offered food. Jensen softened at the sight
of his friend’s usually clear blue eyes darkened by what looked like apprehension and worry.

Wait…apprehension?

“Shit,” Jensen cursed lowly as it dawned on him. “Have you been up all night worrying about me? My reaction to you being a wolf?”

Chris’ lack of a response said more than the boy himself ever could have hoped to say.

Jensen slipped off the stool he’d climbed on to and threw an arm around Chris, giving him a rough, one-armed hug. “I know I didn’t make the time to drive this point home last night, and I’m sorry for that, but I meant it whole-heartedly when I said I wasn’t mad at you. And as far as the wolf thing goes, I’ll tell you something along the lines of what I told Jared; I don’t give a fucking damn. You’re my best friend; the only thing that’s changed, is that now you’re totally getting a rubber bone for your birthday.”

His quip had the desired effect as Chris bellowed a laugh and elbowed him lightly in the gut. “Fuck off, Freckles! I am not a puppy!”

“Yeesh, Jared said the same thing! So touchy,” he mock sniffed, not bothering to hide his grin. “Now eat, damn it! Before I replace it with kibble.”

“Yes, Mom,” Chris rolled his eyes, picking up the fork even as he tried to hide the warmth in his expressive eyes. Jensen smiled, pleased with his efforts even more so when Chris actually whimpered a little at the taste. “I take back everything nasty I ever said to you, Freckles. Move in here with me tomorrow.”

Jensen chuckled at the thought of how Jared would react to that offer. “I would,” he grinned, “but I like your head on top of your body, and my boyfriend not in jail.”

“That’s fair,” Chris smirked. “Fuck, Freckles, I gotta ask, man…how are you taking this so well? You’re so calm and unfazed by it all. How are you not hightailing it to the Canadian border by now?”

Jensen thought about his answer, not wanting to hurt his friend, but at the same time unwilling to lie to him. “I’ve seen evil in my life, Chris,” he finally settled on ambiguity. “I’ve been around it. You’re not it. Jared’s not it. Maybe this is messed up, but in my life I’ve learnt that most monsters are of the human variety, and frankly, sometimes they’re far worse than what our nightmares conjure up. I’ve never judged people on anything but their actions, and you guys have protected me at every turn. You all being werewolves had nothing to do with how safe I always felt around y’all. There’s no part of me that could see any part of any of you, as something bad. Except maybe Jake,” he added as an afterthought, “but that might be a biased opinion.”

“No,” Chris snorted, “that douchebag is almost as bad as his daddy.”

“I wouldn’t know, but I feel sorry for his mom in that case,” Jensen grinned.

Chris eyed him speculatively. “Jared didn’t tell you the whole story,” he said suddenly, cocking his head to the side. “He told you about the Morgan pack?”

“Just that the two packs were at loggerheads,” Jensen supplied. “And that Sophia Bush and Jake Abel were part of the pack.”

“They’re more than part of it,” Chris spoke around a mouthful of lasagna. “Jeff Morgan, the pack Alpha? They’re his family. Jake is his only son.”
“Shit!” Jensen breathed, eyes widening. “Jake is the Alpha heir?” Chris opened his mouth to speak again, and Jensen absently added, “Don’t speak with your mouth full, you animal. You’ll choke on something.”

Chris rolled his eyes, swallowing pointedly. “Abel and Sophia are first cousins, and Sophia is Morgan’s sister’s kid. Jake’s mom died when he was little, and keeping her maiden name was the one thing Jake defied Morgan on. In the end, Morgan allowed him to keep it provided that, as soon as Jake came of age, that he dedicate himself fully to the title and become more involved with the pack. As it is, Jake is only in school not to raise any suspicion.”

“How do you know all this?” Jensen furrowed his brow in confusion.

“I’m an alpha too,” Chris explained, “which means I’m generally part of the entourage Gerald Padalecki takes when we meet the Morgan pack to talk about the treaty, which has been happening more often than not these days. One of the alphas of the Morgan pack, Sebastian Roche? He isn’t as bad as the others. He told me the story in bits and pieces over the years.”

“He runs with Abel, right?” Jensen confirmed, a picture of the boy springing to mind. “Yeah, he seems to have a bit more of a head on him than Sheppard and Jake. So does Sophia.”

Chris stayed quiet at that, finishing off his pasta and getting up to put the plate in the sink. Jensen tracked his friend’s movements with his eyes, debating on whether to push him or not. When a few minutes ticked by without any response from the blue-eyed alpha, Jensen bit his lip and stood up to move towards the motionless boy.

“Chris,” he started gently, clamping a hand gently over his friend’s shoulder. “Is that why you won’t make a move on Sophia? Because she’s in Morgan’s pack?”

“Yes, and no” Chris answered softly, leaning into Jensen slightly, who promptly shifted his position to press back against the extra weight, holding him up. “I’m not making a move on her, because I don’t want to put her in that position. I never want to make her have to choose between her family and her mate, and with the way our packs are, that was bound to be the only choice available to us.”

Jensen’s heart squeezed with how romantic and sweet and thoughtful the gesture was, so typical of his best friend, and so tainted with the politics caused by the rivaling packs.

He chewed mindlessly on his bottom lip, trying to find a way to voice his doubts tactfully. “Chris, buddy, do you think that’s your decision to make?” he asked gently. “I understand you wanting to protect her, hell I even admire it, but Sophia’s a big girl and she seems pretty independent…she strikes me as someone who can take care of themselves. I just feel like she wouldn’t really appreciate your looking out for her if it’s at the expense of her choices.”

“I know you’re right,” Chris mumbled, “but I can’t not protect her from that. If the words ever came out of her mouth? That she knew we were mates and didn’t care about the packs, and wanted to be with me? I wouldn’t think twice.”

“And if it doesn’t? You’ll be unhappy the rest of your life?” Jensen asked, fearing that he already knew the answer.

“If the situations were reversed, you wouldn’t do the same for Jared?” Chris asked instead. Jensen looked away in quiet acknowledgement, because he could argue till he was blue in the face, but that wouldn’t change the fact that there were no limits to what he would or wouldn’t do to protect Jared.

A somber silence fell over the friends, each lost in their own thoughts of the world of complications.
they were embroiled in.

“Jen-SEN!”

A whiny shout and the sound of Chris’ front door tumbling open brought them from their respective reveries. Jensen and Chris exchanged bemused half-grins as Chad and Jared came bursting into the kitchen, each trying to grab the other in a head-lock. The wrestling friends came to a stop in front of them, and Jensen raised his eyebrow in silent question. Jared crossed his arms and glared at Chad, who looked overly smug.

“Chad ate the lasagna you sent for me to have for dinner later!” Jared accused with a pout, sounding all of three years old.

“Jensen meant for you to bring it for me!” Chad retorted. “So there!”

It would have been fine if it was left there, but it was probably Chad sticking his tongue out at Jared that did Chris and Jensen in.

Melting the earlier tension like butter on a frying pan, they burst out laughing. Chad and Jared did nothing to help the situation; in retaliation, Jared had launched himself at Chad and their wrestling match begun anew. Suddenly, Chris stole around the table and Jensen watched with a grin as he took out the lasagna in the fridge and tried to discreetly hide it.

But then, Jensen guessed that werewolves would have super sensitive senses of smell.

Everything went eerily silent for a single moment, as Jared and Chad looked up from their tangled position, straight at Chris, who froze like a deer in the headlights with evidence in hand. Jensen was immobile in his place, too, responding to the sudden inactivity around him.

And then war broke out.

As the fighting alphas scrambled to get to him, Chris darted to Jensen, standing behind the green-eyed boy, and Jensen instinctively held his arms out, acting as a shield.

“Stop!” His voice rang out just before Jared and Chad could tackle him. “Think about it, you tackle me and I won’t make anything for a month.”

Chad flashed him a pout and Jared sent him a sultry, dark grin. “I bet I could convince you otherwise,” he stated huskily, taking a step towards Jensen, who couldn’t stop the smirk spreading over his face.

“I’ll tell your Mom on you,” Chris piped up from behind him, and Jensen couldn’t stop his guffaw at the stricken look on his boyfriend’s face.

“That’s not playing fair, Kane,” Jared groused, looking petulant.

“I got your back, man,” Chad added gleefully. “I’ve got plenty that I’m sure Mama Padalecki will be dying to hear.”

Jared looked to him, puppy-dog-eyes in full effect, and Jensen reacted instinctively, wrapping his arms around the taller boy’s waist. Jared buried his face in the crook of his neck and he aimed a stern glance at Chad and Chris.

“I don’t support tattling,” he mock-reprimanded, mirth dancing in his eyes. “And stop messing with my boyfriend, or he will be the only one to get my cooking for a year.”
“Sorry, Jared,” the other alphas chimed obediently, in perfect unison. Jared smirked at him, and he winked back playfully, the timed responses driving home the camaraderie between them. Looking at the three alphas surrounding him, Jensen marveled at the fact that they meshed this well together, against the odds and expectations.

It was nice.

No. More than that.

It was awesome.

--*Jared*--

“Thanks for breaking up the tension before.”

Jared tore his gaze away from where his mate was dishing up half of Chris’ portion of lasagna for Chad, stifling his amusement as Jensen swatted Chad’s wandering hands away from the open Tupperware container. He turned to grin at Kane in acknowledgement of the blue-eyed alpha’s gratitude.

“Anytime, man,” he nodded amiably. “I felt some of Jen’s anxiety over our mating bond; Chad and I figured you could use the distraction.”

Chris nodded slightly, and Jared wasn’t overly surprised when the other alpha offered no explanation. “I guess now would be the right time,” Chris announced suddenly.

Jared raised an eyebrow in silent question, rotating his wrist in a motion for Chris to elaborate.

“For our talk,” he clarified, straightening his posture and fixing Jared with a menacing look. “Jensen is my little brother,” he stated, almost coldly, and despite their growing friendship, Jared would have had to be an idiot to think that Chris was anything less than deathly serious. “If you do anything to hurt him- anything at all- then me and you are gonna have some serious problems. Break his heart, and I will break every last bone in your body. Twice.” Chris may have been shorter than him, but the boy was more intimidating that Jared cared to admit.

“Gotcha,” Jared nodded solemnly, sensing the raw emotion in the other boy. “I wouldn’t dream of hurting him, Chris.”

“Good,” Chris intoned approvingly. “He’s been through enough already. Which reminds me…you owe me a name, Padalecki.”

Jared clenched his jaw as he immediately caught on to what Chris was asking him. “Name’s Adam Gilligan,” he revealed unrepentantly. “Lives near Jen’s old districts. I promised him we wouldn’t, though, Chris.”

“I didn’t promise a damn thing,” the long-haired boy scowled defiantly. “That bastard hurt him, Jared! I’m not going to just sit around and let that go unpunished.”

“You bet your ass you are.”

Jensen’s firm voice pulled them from their discussion, Chad looking suspicious and Jensen’s eyes a steely emerald.
“It didn’t take you long to break, Jay,” Jen snarked sarcastically. “And Chris, I swear if you hunt Adam down, I’ll never tell you shit again.”

“Don’t play that card, Freckles,” Chris snapped. “The son of a bitch battered you!”

“Nearly killed you,” Jared added angrily, letting his frustration get the better of him in the face of his mate’s adamancy. “Did kill you! Three times you flat-lined!”

Chris’ breath left him in a whoosh as he paled dramatically. Jared snapped his mouth shut as he realized what he’d allowed to slip; he felt sickened as the green-eyed boy shifted his stricken face downwards.

“What the actual fuck are you talking about?” Chad’s devastatingly calm voice, Jared knew, meant only one thing; the boy was pissed.

“Who did what to Jensen?” he asked again, a steely note in his voice. He fixed icy blue eyes on Jared, who was still trying to catch Jensen’s gaze. “One of you better tell me or I swear to Christ…”

“Abusive ex-boyfriend,” Jensen supplied monotonously. The hint of defeat in his mate’s voice struck Jared harder than anything had.

“I’m sorry, then, man,” Chad set his unfinished plate of food down, not even pausing. “But that means you have no say in the matter, because we’re going to kill the fucker.”

Jared was unsurprised at the protectiveness in his best friend’s voice; Chad wasn’t like this with a lot of people, but once you were in his inner circle, it would take hell in a handbasket to get him to bail on you. Jared still didn’t know what happened that day he wasn’t in school, but something had happened with his best friend and his mate, because Jen had slipped into the inner circle faster than even Jared himself had.

“Adam got his just desserts,” Jensen spoke wearily, dragging his eyes up to meet theirs. “Trust me. All I want is for him to be out of my life for good now. All I want is to keep him in the past and not mix him up in my present and future, which is what y’all are going to be doing by hunting him down. He’s out of my life now, and if you guys respect me, then you’ll leave well enough alone. Please?”

Jared didn’t miss the fact that his boyfriend directed those words at him specifically. He felt the anger inside him evaporate as quickly as it had come, melting at the raw vulnerability in his love’s voice.

He was in front of Jensen in two long strides, gathering his mate carefully into his arms. “I’m sorry, mo chroi,” he whispered into silky, dirty-blonde tresses. Jensen shuddered a breath and leaned into him almost imperceptibly. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too,” Jensen mumbled against his shoulder, winding his arms almost hesitantly around Jared’s neck. The Alpha leaned down in response, pressing his lips gently against his mate’s.

“Gah, my eyes!” Chris and Chad groaned simultaneously.

Jensen laughed against his lips as Chris’ horrified voice went up a shade of a pitch.

“Fuck, I’m starting to sound like Chad!”

~*Jensen*~
“Welcome to the Were world.”

Jensen glanced up from his notes, startled at the sweet, feminine voice. He was studying the notes for his Chemistry experiment, head down since Jared, Chris and Chad were all out sick today. His boyfriend- mate- had texted him last night about another treaty meet, and pleaded with him to bunk as well, but Jensen wasn’t about to let, what he hoped was an isolated incident, dictate his schooling career. He promised to keep a low profile and keep Tommy on speed dial just in case; the man was intimidating for a beta.

Now, Jensen looked up meet the startling brown eyes and pin-straight, chestnut hair of one Sophia Bush.

“Ah, um…” he fumbled for words in his surprise. “Thank you,” he eventually managed. “I’m Jensen Ackles, nice to meet you.”

“Sophia Bush, nice to meet you too,” she replied with an amiable smile. “You’re uh…you’re Chris’ best friend, right?” she asked, biting her bottom lip and averting her eyes for a second as she settled herself in the stool next to Jensen’s.

The green-eyed boy’s eyes widened almost comically. “Fuck my life,” he breathed, before blushing deeply in chagrin. “I’m so sorry for the language, I swear my mama taught me better than that,” he grinned. “It’s just…you like Chris, don’t you?”

Sophia’s eyes shot to him as she took in a sharp intake of breath. “Wha-what makes you say that?”

“You bit your lip and looked away when you said his name,” Jensen explained. “It’s a classic tell when a person is hiding a strong emotion about the person they’re speaking of. Also, Jared being the pack Alpha heir, everyone in school refers to me as Jared’s mate, or Jared’s boyfriend, or even Jared’s fuck-toy,” he rolled his eyes at the last one, “but you? No…you referred to me as Chris’ best friend, which implies that in your mind, Chris is more important than Jared, since Chris is the stronger association to you. Judging from the normal Were hierarchy, it implies that you have a personal interest in Chris, since there’s really only one time another wolf should take priority over a pack Alpha.”

Sophia blinked at him, stunned into silence, and Jensen felt self-conscious all at once. “I’m sorry,” he grinned sheepishly, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Foot-In-Mouth disease.”

The petite girl burst into laughter. “Man, I can see why Chris broke his no-friends rule when he met you,” Sophia giggled. “You’re awesome, Jen-Ster. Mind if I call you that?”

“Go right ahead,” Jensen grinned, chin flicking upwards in amused acknowledgement. “I’m gonna call you Soph, so you might as well have your own nickname too.”

“Awesome,” she giggled again. “First, let one of us know if someone calls you a fuck-toy again,” she narrowed her eyes. ”There are some fun ways to deal with disrespect. Two, do you wanna be lab partners whenever our respective eye-candies are off trying to save the packlands?”

Jensen laughed at the term that he was definitely going to tease Chris to hell about. “Answer one thing first Soph,” he leaned forward, resting his weight on his propped-up elbows. “Enya or Metallica?”

“Hmph,” she smirked. “I love how you ask me that like Enya is even close to the league of real music.”

Jensen blinked owlishly. “Soph,” he finally nodded his approval. “I think this is gonna be the start of
"So Hollywood really went all out in getting the lore wrong, huh?" Jensen chuckled as he carefully measured out 125ml of hydrochloric acid into his conical flask.

"Yeah," Sophia scoffed absently from where she was scooping out powdered sulfur. "We can shift whenever we want to, definitely not only on a full moon, although we are our strongest then. Damn this thing reeks," she added with a grumble.

"Mm, I’d go for skin-eating acid any day of the week," he grinned impishly, adjusting his safety goggles and reaching for a little brown bottle. "So how does a mating bond manifest in wolf form?" he asked curiously as he filled a dropper with blue indicator.

"I think Beaver would be the best person to answer any of your mating questions," she answered diplomatically. Jensen almost dropped the entire bottle of solution.

"Beaver’s a Were?" he hissed incredulously. "I’m going to kill Jared, he left out all the important bits!"

"Been doin’ that ever since he was a pup," a gruff voice came from behind them, making both of them jump.

Jensen winced. "Hey Mr. Beaver."

"Afternoon, Sir," Sophia grinned unabashedly. "We were just talking about how you totally ship Jared and Jen-Ster."

"I what now?" Their teacher looked as bewildered as Jensen felt.

"You ship them!" Sophia explained brightly. "You like them as a couple!"

Jensen would be hard-pressed to say who blustered more at that statement.

"Jensen," Beaver eventually gave up, grousing at the green-eyed boy, "you come to me sometime this week so we can answer your questions, alright boy?"

"Yes, Sir," Jensen nodded meekly.

Sophia giggled as the older man stalked away, muttering under his breath something that sounded an awful lot like "idjit high school kids". "Beaver’s the Padalecki Pack’s medic," she explained. "He used to help my pack- the Morgan Pack- back when I was a kid. When my Uncle Jack died, and Uncle Jeff took over as pack Alpha, all of that just kind of…stopped." A sad look passed over the girl’s delicate features.

"I’m sorry," Jensen murmured softly. For as little a time as he’d known her, he felt badly for the beautiful girl’s pain. She sent him a wan smile, shaking her head.

"That’s okay," she refuted, just as softly. "I think a part of me wouldn’t have even noticed had it not been for…"

She clammed up instantly, Jensen’s attention fully on her. “Had it not been for who?” he asked, waiting for her answer with bated breath. She seemed to hesitate for a second, glancing furtively from side to side.
“My mate,” she finally whispered. Jensen raised his eyebrows, feigning shock.

“Who?”

“I can’t tell,” she shook her head regretfully. “I don’t want to put him in a difficult position with his pack… I don’t think Gerald Padalecki will ever accept someone into his pack who has Morgan blood running through her veins.”

“How will you know if you don’t try?” Jensen asked, exasperation tinging his tone. They loved each other, but both were trying to protect each other. It was romantic and Shakespearean poetical, but they were in the 21st century for Christ’s sake!

“Trying was what killed Juliet,” she pointed out sadly.

“You forget that we’re in a different time now,” Jensen rolled his eyes. “What’s the bet that in this day and age, the Montagues and the Capulets would have been Facebook friends?”

Sophia laughed shakily. “I can’t risk him,” she maintained firmly. “I don’t even know if he likes me too.”

Jensen wanted to bang his head against the desk. “I’ll bet you’ll want to hear it from his mouth, too,” he muttered inaudibly.

“That’d be nice,” she said dryly, and Jensen cursed her Were-hearing. “But he won’t. He’s stubborn like that.”

“So you want to be the pot or the kettle?” Jensen arched his brow.

“Shut up, Jen-Ster.”

Before he could come back with a witty riposte, his phone buzzed insistently in his pocket. He grinned as he looked at the caller ID.

“What’s happening, Al?” he answered his phone with an apologetic grin at Sophia.

“Jensen.”

The single word turned the blood in his veins to ice.

In the years that he’d known Aldis Hodge, the man had never called him by name unless it was incredibly serious. Jensen sat up straight, already packing his books into his bag. “What happened, Al?”

“Jensen…” the man hesitated. “I’m sorry bro, it’s your dad.”

Jensen stopped his motion, and his breathing. A dull roaring filled his ears and he thought Sophia might have been speaking to him, but after a second, even the image of her went blurry. “What happened, Al?” he repeated roughly, gripping the counter to hold himself up.

“Not what you think, kid,” Aldis reassured him, and like magic, the sound in the room went back up. Sophia’s concerned voice halted mid-sentence when he held out a placatory hand.

“Tell me,” he nearly snapped.

“He’s in trouble, Jensen,” Aldis told him seriously. “Worse than he was ever in before. I’m sorry, JR, but I think you’re going to have to come down here.”
Jensen nodded, even though his friend couldn’t see him. “I’ll be on the next train ride out.”

“We’ll be waiting for you, man,” his friend reported softly. “We’ve still got your back.”


“What’s the matter, Jen-Ster?” she asked worriedly. “Do you want me to call Chris?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I’ll text him and Jared on the way. I’m sorry, I have to go.”

He left the classroom without a second glance.

Reaching home in record time, he flung clothes into a duffel bag and got out his emergency stack of cash, stuffing it unceremoniously into the side pocket. He looked at his phone in indecision, wanting to call Jared, but at the same time, not wanting the boy to worry about something that wasn’t his problem. He would just have to make sure he was back in time for Sunday brunch with the Padaleckis and it would be okay.

Decision made, he grabbed his keys, switched off the lights and locked the door. Hoisting his duffel on to his shoulder, he turned around…

…and found Jared leaning against the hood of his truck, looking pissed off.

Well, fan-fucking-tastic.

###

Chapter End Notes

How’s Jared going to react to Jen leaving? And how will Jen explain it? Questions, questions!!

Hope you enjoyed it!
I can help you carry the burden

Chapter Notes

Le gasp!! I am so sorry for my absence! Blame it on visitors that won't leave and a ban from my laptop out of courtesy! But I'm back! Hope you enjoy!

Once more, a gigantic thank you to all my readers. You guys are flipping incredible, and I can never express how truly honored I am by your wonderfully kind words. Love you!

This is for j2_is_life; hope you enjoyed France! Also, this is for Sports_boy, our newest reader! Welcome, hon! Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

The tension was thick enough to choke on it.

To give his father due credit, Gerald Padalecki wasn’t backing down from the shouting match he was having with JD Morgan. Jared was torn between having one of his own with Jake and keeping an eye on Morgan, who he didn’t trust as far as he could throw him.

“I think that human’s attack on my son was provocation enough, Padalecki!” Jeff thundered, and Jared bristled at the disgust in the other alpha’s voice.

“That human, is one your son has been harassing since he first came into town,” Jared responded hotly, not missing the shocked look his father sent him; he had never, not once encroached on his father like that, never stepped on his feet during a meet, but damnit, he’d never been this mad before either. No one was allowed to disrespect his mate.

“My son and I do not chase; we obtain,” Morgan sneered. Jared tilted his chin in defiance.

“Seems like both father and son have been having difficulty in that department, then.”

“Watch your mouth, you impudent little pup!” Morgan’s face twisted in rage.

“I’d heed that advice yourself, Jeff,” Gerald rumbled, eyes flashing dangerously. “I will not tolerate disrespect towards my son any more than you will yours. Now I suggest we confer at a later date before we both end up doing something we’ll have to hide.”

With that, the Alpha walked away, shoulders back and walking with pride. Jared followed, along with the rest of the alphas, but before he could shift to run home like he usually did, he was stopped by his father.

“You’ll be riding with me, son,” Gerald’s voice broached no room for argument. “We seem to have something to discuss.”

Jared nodded his compliance, shooting Chad and Chris a reassuring grin before climbing into his
father’s Jeep. He waited patiently for his father to bring up Jensen, and he wasn’t disappointed.

“What do you know of the human that Jake nearly attacked, Jared?” he asked in a measured tone. “Might I ask what provoked the highly protective tone and the willingness to potentially incite an altercation at what was supposed to be a peace treaty meeting?”

Jared cringed, feeling like all of five years old in his father’s presence. “I’m sorry, dad,” he apologized softly. “I couldn’t let Jeff pin this all on Jensen, it wasn’t his fault.”

“That may be so, but that doesn’t explain your more than ardent outburst, son,” Gerald pointed out almost gently. “Is this boy a friend of yours? I’ve warned you against being too close with humans.”

Jared cringed, taking a deep breath. He remembered all the warnings; they had played in his mind like a broken record the whole of the first day he spent texting Jensen. But the first time he’d held the boy’s hand? Kissed him? Spent the night with him curled up in his arms? Everything his father had cautioned him about had just sort of faded into the background. He trusted Jensen, believed in their relationship.

And now was the time to prove that.

“He’s more than a friend, dad,” Jared admitted, his voice quiet, but strong with his conviction. “Jensen is my mate.”

Jared hit the dash hard when his father slammed on the brakes. His forearm throbbed where he’d braced it and he cast a wide-eyed look of shock at the man next to him. Gerald Padalecki was shell-shocked, motionless save for the rise and fall of his chest. Jared was just beginning to worry about the grey pallor his skin had taken when the man spoke in a hushed whisper.

“A human mate?” Gerald shook his head as if clearing cobwebs. “We haven’t had one in the pack in decades, Jared. Are you sure about this? Is it not just a particularly potent teenage infatuation?”

A bristle of irritation worked its way under his skin. Why did everyone seem to think that he was just in for a piece of Jensen’s ass? Chad was right; people didn’t just believe in love at first sight anymore; his father couldn’t even believe that he’d found the real thing.

“Don’t patronize me, dad,” he snapped, before he even realized what he was doing. “I know what Jensen is to me, and I won’t have you undermining that because he’s not a Were.”

His father blinked owlishly at him and mortification quickly replaced his anger. He was never usually this disrespectful, least of all to his father! Jared couldn’t fathom what had come over him, but before he could apologize, his father explained it to him.

“When we mate, not even the respect we have for kin or the pack Alpha- in this case, both, for you- can override the dominant protectiveness we feel towards our mate,” he breathed, a look of doubt and worry settling into his usually warm hazel eyes. “This boy really is your mate.”

Jared nodded, even though it hadn’t really been a question. He waited his father out once more, growing anxious when the man started the car and continued driving, a tense silence settling between the pack Alpha and his successor.

When they finally reached the house, his father turned in his seat to look at him. “Son,” his voice was gentle, and Jared felt heartened for it, “if this boy is your mate, then human or no, we will accept him. You’ll have to bring him to meet the family, of course, and the pack… but I do want you to be careful what you believe of him.” He held up a placatory hand before Jared could growl at the implications of his words. “I’m just saying… what was his reaction when you told him about all this,
“He was supportive and understanding.” Jared shot back defiantly. “He was amazing, dad!”

“Precisely, my boy!” Gerald stressed. “Which human would give you such a response? Is it not understandable to be suspicious over his casual acceptance about our existence? How could he possibly just accept something like this?”

“I felt him, dad, I was with him!” Jared argued hotly. “I know my mate!”

“Do you, Jared?” his father asked evenly. “Because sometimes we tend to see only that which we are looking for.”

His retort fell short on his lips. Truthfully, his father was bringing up every concern that he’d had since telling Jensen the truth. Anger gave way to fear and doubt, and both churned unpleasantly at his stomach. Jensen hadn’t lied…had he?

A buzzing in his pocket shocked Jared back from his deep thoughts. His father favored him with another concerned look before leaving the car, going up to the house and giving him some privacy. He flipped the phone open wearily, hoping only for one voice to sound in his ear; the only one who could lift the darkness and the weight from his shoulders.

“Jen?”

“No, kid, but it’s about him,” Mr. Beaver’s voice came through the speaker. “I just overheard some parts of a conversation your boy was having with someone on the phone…someone named Al?”

A memory flashed through Jared’s mind; when he’d woken up in search of his mate, he’d heard Jensen talking on the phone. He only managed to catch the “G’night, Al” but he had no doubt that it was the same person. Jensen’s vague answer replayed in his mind.

I needed to call an old friend from back home.

Which friend? Had to be close, or else Jensen wouldn’t have been totally comfortable calling the man at ten after 2 in the morning. What could Jen have wanted from him at that hour? Uneasiness injected into his veins as he realized that the phone call took place directly after Jensen had his nightmare about Jared hurting him.

“Did you hear what they talked about?” Jared asked, fighting at the dizzy spin of his head as fear hollowed him out. Suddenly, he wasn’t sure at all about what he was about to hear.

“Only a few words,” Beaver’s grim voice reported. “Something like ‘not what you think’ and ‘in trouble’ and ‘think you should come back here’ and ‘we’ll be waiting for you here’. Then he tore out of here like a bat out of hell.”

Jared shook his head, though no one was there to see him do it, fighting down the rising panic that was ready to consume him whole. Could he really have been this wrong? Had he been blinded by his own love for Jensen? Was his father right, had he only seen that which he’d looked for?

He hung up on Beaver without a thought, stumbling out of his father’s Jeep and racing towards his beat-up truck. He barely got the driver’s seat door closed before he was tearing out of the driveway, breaking every speed limit in an attempt to get to his mate. He half-heartedly prayed for there to be some kind of misunderstanding, while the dominant part of him tried to think of what he could do to keep the green-eyed boy in his life. He would give up the pack, if he had to. He couldn’t give up being a Were, but he would stop his shifting. He’d have to find out from Beaver if it would affect
him physically, but he wasn’t even sure that it would matter if it did affect him. He would do anything to keep Jensen in his life, even if it meant giving up all he’d known his entire life.

He got out of the car carefully, scared that his deepest fears would be confirmed. He almost doubled over in relief when he heard his mate switching off what he presumed to be the lights, and it took all of his willpower not to sprint towards the sound. Instead, he leaned against the truck and allowed his relief to flood him, embracing it, feeling it change slowly and give way to an almost desperate thirst for answers. What was this game Jensen was playing at? Jared shuddered to think what would have happened if he hadn’t spoken back to Morgan and subsequently ended the meet prematurely.

His phone was always switched off during meets.

Trying not think on how close he may or may not have come to losing his mate, he fought back the rising nausea and faced Jensen as he locked the door. Turning around, his mate faltered in his steps, eyes going wide at the sight of him. He heard it when Jensen swallowed hard, felt the stab the sound pounded into his gut. The green-eyed boy was moving with deliberate steps, and it didn’t ease Jared’s anxiety when Jensen didn’t meet his eyes. His patience was wearing thin, and irritation replaced his relief; after all, it was easier to be angry than to face how much he couldn’t live without his Jen.

Jensen stopped in front of him, scuffing the toe of his sneakers against the pavement in a nervous motion. His heart hurt, but the stubborn part of him couldn’t bring himself to show any weakness. If anything, he scowled at his mate.

“Anything you want to be telling me, Jensen?”

*And wasn’t that a clipped tone? Way to go, making him feel so safe around you, dumbass.*

“Jay, I can explain,” Jensen said weakly. At the same time that pain filled him for the feeble tone of his mate’s voice, anger flooded in as well.

“How can you be so scared?!” he asked, almost scathingly. What more could he possibly do here? Was this the reason human mates were so rare?

Jensen winced, shoulders hunching automatically as if to fend off a blow. Green eyes shot to Jared’s hazel, wide and hurt. “Why wouldn’t I be scared? And more to the point, how’d you find out what happened?”

“Mr. Beaver heard you,” Jared all but spat, pain slicing through him at Jensen’s question; *why wouldn’t I be scared?*

“Damn wolf hearing,” Jensen muttered, almost distractedly. “Jay, I have every reason in the world to be afraid.” His mate’s reasonable tone had him favoring his anger over his hurt.

“Jensen, just because you don’t understand something, doesn’t make it…”

“*Understand?*” Jensen’s incredulous voice came over his stung tone. “What’s there to understand, Jared? It was a series of stupid mistakes that never should have happened!”

Now it was Jared’s turn to reel backwards with pain. “You think it was a mistake?” he asked, his voice oddly emotionless.

“Of course,” Jensen frowned. “And now I have to go back home before someone gets hurt because of a stupid mistake made out of boredom and loneliness.”
Jared could swear he heard his heart break in that moment. Tears flooded his eyes and Jensen’s frown deepened. “Fine,” he whispered, his voice wobbling and broken. “But next time Jensen, you should think about your stupid mistakes, and think about the people you hurt in order to entertain yourself and take away the boredom.”

He was about to walk away, his heart in pieces, when Jensen grabbed almost desperately at his jacket. He turned his face to see, not the remorse he was expecting, but instead bemused confusion. Jensen blinked owlishly at him.

“Entertain myself?” his mate repeated, sounding mystified. “What the hell are you talking about, Jared?”

A few tears slipped from his eyes, and apparently that was Jensen’s kryptonite, because instead of demanding answers, he wrapped Jared up in warm arms that were far too gentle and loving, a counterpoint to the words he’d spoken about mistakes. Jared swallowed down the almost overwhelming want to let Jensen just make it all better, pushing the boy away.

“If I was just entertainment, a stupid mistake, then why did you let me believe you were okay with my being a Were?” he asked sadly.

If possible, Jensen’s face deepened even more in confusion. The tiniest flare of hope lit up Jared’s insides. Could it be possible? Was this all just a terrible misunderstanding?

“What does my dad’s gambling problems have to do with you being a Were?” Jensen’s perplexed tone strengthened his hope, and he dared to voice his deep fear.

“I thought you were leaving to go home, to get away from…from what I am.”

Comprehension lightened Jensen’s face, quickly replaced by irritation. “I don’t know what Beaver thought he’d heard, but you should know me better, Jared!” Green sparks flew from his fiery eyes. “How could you even think that I would leave you? Jesus, how could you even think that I’d use anyone for entertainment, least of all, you?!?”

But the anger from his mate was overshadowed by the crushing relief that burned more tears into his eyes. “You’re not leaving me,” he whispered, feeling almost weak. “You’re not leaving me.”

Jared caught his mate in a massive bear hug, but rather than melting into it like he normally did, Jensen shrugged away, hurt caught in an intricate web of anger in his eyes. “How could you think I would?” he asked again, the low, even voice worse than the shouting. “You of all people should trust me!”

“Because you’ve shown me so much trust!” Jared snapped, the harsh bellow sounding unfair to his own ears. What on earth was he doing? No, no, no, now is the time to fix and straighten out the misunderstanding, not fight some more!!

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jensen demanded, jaw set angrily.

Don’t answer that, don’t answer that, don’t answer that…he ordered his brain firmly.

Apparently his mouth was slow to the memo.

“I can’t trust you without you trusting me too! And, Jensen, let’s face it, you don’t give me anything to trust! You never talk to me, and I practically have to strong-arm you into anything that has any sort of emotional maturity! It’s like you don’t ever feel anything!”
Jared knew he’d overstepped that precarious boundary when Jensen’s head snapped backwards as though he’d been slapped and the anger in his eyes shattered to reveal deep hurt.

“Is that what you think?” he asked quietly, almost mouthing the words. “That I don’t feel? That I don’t hurt? That I never tell you what made the scars on my soul because I’m emotionally impaired? Then you tell me, Jared; why the fuck did you even bother trying?”

Not waiting for an answer, he turned around, hitched his bag high on his shoulder and walked away.

Jared might have lost his mate after all…just not for the reasons he thought.

~*Jensen*~

Angrily swiping at the rapidly falling rivulets of tears streaming from his eyes like an unclosed faucet, Jensen trudged down the street and made it to the T-junction at the end of his road before Jared caught up to him in his rumbling truck.

“Jen, baby, please stop. Please get into the car.”

Jensen crossed his arms even tighter, ignoring how childish he was acting in favor of the hurt still searing in his veins. While part of him knew he was irrationally upset, and that this was his fault for not telling Jared that he was leaving, another, more dominant part of him wanted to foster the anger. The fact that he couldn’t stay mad at Jared had been a source of increasing unease, and now he wanted to nurture the ill-feelings, if only to prove to himself that he was still capable of being strong enough to stand on his own.

While all this had seemed like good reasons at first, they all now filtered from his mind like water through a sieve in the face of Jared’s sweet voice and the slow motion of the truck following him.

“Jensen, please,” Jared pleaded from his position driving. “Let me take you where you need to go. I don’t want you taking the train, and whatever trouble you’re gearing up to face there, I don’t want you to face it alone.”

Clenching his jaw against the urge, Jensen waked stubbornly forward, keeping his jaw locked so he wouldn’t talk. Suddenly, the truck sped up, and Jensen experienced a single moment of utter devastation before the truck hair-pinned and came to a screaming stop a few feet from him. His reprimand for Jared to be more careful and not hurt himself died on Jensen’s lips as the boy stalked determinedly to him.

He went around Jensen, making him turn instinctively. Jensen raised an eyebrow in confusion when Jared took a step forward, automatically taking the same step backwards. Jared kept walking, forcing Jensen to step backwards until his back pressed flush against the truck. The Alpha’s hands came up to frame Jensen’s face, gripping almost bruisingly hard, making sure that he couldn’t avert his gaze.

Jensen blinked owlishly at his boyfriend, his anger forgotten in the midst of confusion and his body’s reaction to Jared’s close proximity.

His dilated pupils and the harsh, choppy panting had nothing to do with fear.

“Baby.” Jared’s voice was tender and soft and gentle, a counterpoint to the fierce grip of his hands and enough to make Jensen focus every fiber of his being on the words leaving his mouth. “I love you. You’re the most important thing in the world to me. If nothing else, know that those words are the absolute truth.” He sighed, regret darkening his hazel orbs. “I overreacted when Beaver phoned me and said you were leaving. In the meet today, I may or may not have spoken out of turn when
Morgan insulted you, and then I had to explain to my dad why… and I told him about us.” Jensen’s breath left him in a whoosh, the information hitting him like a punch. They’d agreed to hold out on telling the Padalecki’s that Jensen was more than just Jared’s boyfriend, so it surprised him that Jared had reneged on their plan. His overwhelming worry for his boyfriend took precedence over the fear of the repercussions of that decision.

“Oh, Jay,” he whispered, a horrified feeling settling into his stomach as he considered another reason behind his boyfriend’s anguish. “I’m touched you would stick up for me, but at what cost? Did your father… did he…?”

“No,” Jared refuted, and Jensen exhaled Shakily in relief. “No, he didn’t kick me out of the pack or anything. He was just worried about the fact that you took it so well. He was suspicious, and thought you were going to run.”

Realization dawned on Jensen, softening him even more. “And so you panicked when you got the phone call.”

“And so I panicked when I got the phone call,” Jared nodded. “I know I should have trusted you, and I’m sorry I didn’t, it’s just that all of this is really new to me, too. Sometimes it scares me how much blind faith I have in you.”

Jensen sighed cavernously, letting go of the last of his anger. “I’m sorry too,” he whispered, turning his cheek towards Jared’s hand. “I’ll try to trust you more and open up more. It’s just so odd to be able to trust someone so fully…I haven’t had that in a long time.”

“I know, baby,” Jared mumbled, pressing his body flush against Jensen’s and dipping his head to press soft kisses over his mate’s face. “But you have me, now, you’re not alone. You’re mine,” he half-growled, “and I don’t ever want you to try to tackle things alone anymore. Mine,” he repeated, nipping lightly at Jensen’s pulse point, eliciting a half-moan, half-chuckle from his green-eyed captive.

After a few moments of basking in the loving caresses, Jensen blurted out: “My dad has a gambling problem, combined with a bit of an alcohol addiction.”

Jared stopped his ministrations, looking at Jensen with nothing but patience and love reflected in his endless chocolatey eyes.

Jensen took a deep breath. “It started when Jody died,” he pressed on. “He’d get himself lost in the bottom of a whiskey bottle and I’d get random calls in the middle of the night telling me to come fetch him. More times than I can count, since I was 8 years old, I was dragging him out of bars and wrestling him to bed, staying up with him to make sure he never choked on his own vomit or anything. About 7 years ago, the gambling started too. Poker, pool, darts…anything you could play at a bar, always to get money for his next drink. That’s actually where I learnt how to play pool,” he added, shrugging slightly. “I hustled a lot to pay off his debts…I guess when the stakes are yours and your father’s lives, you tend to sharpen up real quick.”

Jared sucked in a breath and tightened his arms around him, but true to form, he didn’t interrupt.

“It stopped for a while since we’ve been here,” the lie cut razors in his throat, but if he was to keep the abuse a secret, Jensen knew he’d have to be sparing on the details of his half-truth explanation. “Until he left for that weekend for work. I got worried when he didn’t come back as scheduled, and phoned an old friend of mine from home to check if he might have gone back there. This weekend would have been Jody’s birthday, so I thought it would be a good place to check. Aldis- my friend-called earlier today to say that I needed to get home because Eric’s in trouble. I was going to call you
on the road,” he concluded, averting his eyes in chagrin. “I didn’t want to make my problem yours and I didn’t want you to judge Eric because of a mistake.”

*More like a series of mistakes,* Jensen thought bitterly, still wondering why it meant so much to him for Jared to see the abuse as one big mistake instead of hating his father for it. Hating him the way he should be hating him.

“That’s why you sounded scared...” the realization dawned in his eyes before he refocused on Jensen. "You’re my mate,” Jared told him softly, speaking against his lips. “Your problems are my problems. I want you with all your drama, baby, just like I hope you’ll still want me when you see my own familial song-and-dance.”

“I’ll always want you,” Jensen whispered, letting himself let go and slumping tiredly into Jared’s strong, waiting arms. He let himself be supported, almost crying with the sheer relief it brought to shift the load on his shoulders to someone else for the first time in 10 years. He felt weakened, but stronger; dazed, but never more clear-headed. As Jared lifted him in his arms, he let go, safe with the knowledge that the love of his life was taking the reins from him for a bit. He was just barely cognizant of the words streaming from Jared’s mouth.

“I got you, baby, I got you…it’s okay, you can let go now. I’m gonna take care of this...gonna take care of you. I can share the weight on your shoulders, mo chroi...let me take care of you. I love you, mo chroi...sleep. I’m here and I’ve got you.”

For the first time in a decade…the beautiful boy with the pain-filled eyes felt safe.

~*Jared*~

People always said it was the kindest hearts that felt the most pain.

Jared never really understood what they meant. In his mind, the kindest hearts should have been the ones who have seen kindness in the world and are therefore not jaded by the pain of the past. Wouldn’t a heart that’s been broken be safe-guarded from the world by walls of cruelty and indifference?

Now, looking at his beloved mate, Jared understood.

Jensen had endured nothing but pain in his life. Losing three parents, an alcoholic father with a gambling addiction that he has to look after, an abusive ex-boyfriend, bullies...life had dealt him the crappiest cards ever. Still, he had more compassion and goodness in his little finger than most people possessed in their entire bodies. It never failed to amaze him how Jensen continued to love the world that had hurt him so.

He felt happy to lift the burden that Life had placed on his love’s shoulders and carry it for him for a while. As soon as he had, Jensen had slipped into sleep, and only now did Jared see how truly exhausted his chroi had been by the weight he’d been carrying for the last decade. He made it look effortless, but Jared now saw the inevitable toll it took and he resolved to share the load more often.

That in mind, he’d bundled Jensen up in blankets and tucked him into the passenger seat of his truck, filled up on gas and called his father to explain what happened. He was surprised when his mother took the phone and revealed that she’d been told Jensen was his mate. She even further surprised him when she told him to drive Jensen there and back home, and to make sure that he had whatever he needed. He loved his mother all the more for the understanding in her tone and the unconditional
love she had both for Jared, and already for Jensen.

Jared was distracted from his thoughts when his phone buzzed in his pocket. “Yo,” he answered absently, stealing a glance at his sleeping mate.

“Is he with you?” Chris’ frantic voice came over the line. Uh-oh. He knew there was one more call he was supposed to have made…

“Calm down, Chris…” he tried to placate the panicked alpha.

“I WILL NOT CALM DOWN, JARED!” he bellowed, making Jared cringe away from the slim black phone in his hand. “Is he with you, yes or no?”

“Yes,” Jared answered hurriedly, biting his lip in sympathy as Chris’ relieved exhale sounded along with the distinct sound of his head thudding against something hard. “I meant to…”

“Save it Padalecki, I’m too fucking thankful to be mad right now. You and Freckles are going to explain all this to me when I can work up the space to be angry. But I swear the next time a scrawny pipsqueak named Conner-something-from-Art comes around asking why Jensen took off from school like hell hounds were chasing him, and neither of you are available, I’m siccing Mama Padalecki on you both.”

“Who’s Conner?” Jared growled slightly, jealousy biting at his insides. Instinctively, he reached out to encase Jensen’s hand in a possessive grasp. His mate barely reacted, simply snuggling into the seat and pulling the hand closer to his chest, making Jared smile.

“He’s from Art,” Jared could hear the eye-roll in Chris’ voice. “Duh.”

“Chris, don’t be a dick,” Jared complained with a frown.

“Obviously I don’t know much further than that,” Chris snorted. “Kid was practically tripping over himself.”

Jared felt a weird sense of satisfaction at the knowledge. “I’ll tell Jen to call you when he wakes up.”

“Kinky bastard,” Chris snarked before hanging up. Jared closed his phone with a chuckle, turning his attention back to the road. He had another three hours ahead of him and he had no intention of stopping until he got to his mate’s hometown.

He hoped Jensen wouldn’t send him home. He understood that his mate didn’t want him to see the guy he used to be, but Jared was in love with the boy sitting next to him; whoever he might have been in the past didn’t matter anymore. He would always love his mate and would forgive him anything, but he felt like it was important to understand Jensen’s life before him. Else, how would he ever really understand Jensen now? His grandfather always taught him that the past defined the person one becomes in the present. Now was his chance to test the theory. But most important, it was his chance to prove to his love that not everything had to be handled alone. That he could lean on him, and Jared wouldn’t let him fall. That he could trust in their love enough to expose it to both their worlds knowing that neither had the power to tear them apart.

Determination swept over him once more. His love would be enough to pull them through. He would make sure of it.

###
I felt like it was important to dedicate a chapter to Jensen finally letting go and letting someone else take the responsibility he's shouldered since he was 8, so I hope you didn't get bored with this chapter! Hope you enjoyed! Thanks for reading!

-JayGirl
The resident Badass

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for taking so long with this! There actually was cause for concern this time!

I had a really awful experience last week. Despite being a strong swimmer, I nearly drowned and almost died. It was a harrowing experience for me, and I urge you guys to be careful, because the tide is a temperamental mistress. I'm recovering at the moment, but nonetheless, I apologize for the delay!

Once again, thank you all so much for reading! It humble me beyond measure, and I'm positively blown away by the fact that we're on 700+ for comments and kudos. You guys are amazing! Much love! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

The first thing he became aware of was the comforting, familiar rumble buzzing through him. Jared's truck, his fuzzy mind provided helpfully. Why was he in Jared's truck? His tongue darted out between his lips in an attempt to soothe its dryness, head pounding when the chapped skin threatened to split under the pressure. Eyes still closed, he took a deep breath, taking comfort from the smell he uniquely associated with his boyfriend. Slowly, his memory came back to him and he cringed internally at the hard time he'd given Jared.

"Your breathing and heart rate's been different for a while now…I guess as a Were, I'll kind of always know when you feign sleep." The boy's hesitant voice cut through Jensen's chagrin. "Are you…are you hiding from me?"

Jensen finally let his eyes slowly open, turning his head to face Jared and feeling remorseful for the worried frown that decorated the Alpha’s face. “Never, Jay,” he answered truthfully. “I think I’m just hiding from the real world issues. If my eyes are closed, and I can just know you’re next to me, I can almost pretend that life outside this truck- that life outside of you and me- doesn’t exist.”

His boyfriend’s hazel eyes softened, reminding Jensen of melted Hershey bars. “I felt the same way that morning we were in your bed,” he confessed in a low voice. “Like I could stand to live in that Jared-and-Jensen bubble forever.”

Jensen nodded thoughtfully, absently taking his boyfriend’s hand and rubbing his thumb across it in soothing circles. Jared made that little purring sound deep in his chest that he didn’t even seem to be conscious of; the one that melted Jensen’s heart like a popsicle on a summer day in Texas.

“We handle things together, though, and we’ll make it through,” he murmured, the statement as much as a realization to him as it was a reassurance to Jared. “There’s nothing we can’t handle if we tackle it together.”

“Damn straight,” Jared grinned, that wide, toothy, puppy-dog grin that stole Jensen’s heart in the first
place. Contentment settled over him; the grin had been missing on his boyfriend and mate’s face, and it brought him a certain modicum of comfort to see it there. “Call Chris,” Jared reminded him, shaking his head ruefully. “I don’t wanna poke the Mama Bear again.”

“You’ll be doing just that if he ever finds out you called him a Mama Bear,” Jensen snorted, nonetheless fishing out his cell from his back pocket and hitting speed-dial 2.

“Jensen Ross Ackles, what in the name of Mother Luna made you think it was even remotely okay for you to run screaming from school and then disappear without a trace, and without answering your God damned phone?”

Jensen blinked at the sudden scolding that Chris delivered by way of greeting. Jared shoving his fist in his mouth to muffle his laughter pulled Jensen from his stupor. Punching his boyfriend lightly in the gut, satisfied when his choked off wheeze took the place of his laughter, Jensen processed the sentence slowly.

“Okay,” he ordered his response in his mind. “One, how do you know my middle name? Two, who is Mother Luna? And three, I did not scream, I merely ran.”

Chris huffed his irritation. “Mother Luna is the moon Goddess, who we believe protects us when we shift, among other things, and I know your middle name from searching through your student file earlier to try and find another emergency contact.”

“Aren’t those supposed to be private?” Jensen frowned.

“That doesn’t matter,” Chris brushed off smoothly. “You’re avoiding the topic.”

“What topic?” Jensen feigned innocence. “I wasn’t aware there was a topic.”

“The topic was you running off from school.” Jensen could almost hear his friend gritting his teeth.

“And when exactly did this happen?” he asked politely, smothering his smirk.

“Today! It happened earlier today!” Chris enunciated in frustration.

“What happened earlier today?” Jensen asked, his voice saturated with bewilderment. Evasion techniques were his specialty.

“You ran off from school!”

“What about me running off from school?”

“That was the topic!”

“The topic of what, Chris?”

“The topic of…huh?”

“What?”

“Um…”

“Excuse me?”

“Ackles!”
“Kane!”

“Damnit Jensen!” Chris finally snapped, and Jared finally gave into the gut-busting laughter that rocked his entire frame as he threw his head back. Jensen bit down hard on his lip to keep his voice even.

“You know, Chris, you’re hardly making any sense blustering like that,” he said in a completely reasonable tone. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but we should talk about this when you’re a little more coherent don’t you agree? Good talk, Chris, later buddy!” Jensen hung up without waiting for a reply.

He stuffed his phone in his back pocket, exhaling a giggle born of relief as Jared continued to howl with laughter next to him. He knew he was now even further in his own grave, but Jensen figured he could deal with one problem at a time.

“Oh, man, Chris is going to go ape-shit when we get back home,” Jared chuckled as soon as he’d gotten back control. Jensen bit his lip, uncertainty rearing its ugly head.

“Jay, I’m still not so sure about you coming with me…”

“We handle things together, and we’ll make it through. There’s nothing we can’t handle if we tackle it together,” Jared repeated his words verbatim to him. “We’re a team, Jensen, you know that just as well as I do. What’s the real reasons you keep trying to push me away here? If it’s you not wanting to come out to your dad yet, I get it.” His boyfriend’s chiseled features were alight with sincerity. “I don’t have to meet him just yet.”

“It’s not just that,” Jensen shook his head, rubbing a tired hand over his face. “I don’t want you to meet JR.”

~*Jared*~

Jared furrowed his brow in confusion. He searched his memory, trying to dredge up any snippet of revelations from Jensen he’d heard that alluded to someone called JR.

“Jensen, baby, what are you talking about?” he cocked his head to the side in confusion.

“I’m not the same person I used to be, Jay,” Jensen confessed, confusing Jared even more. “I’m different now!”

Sensing that comfort was needed, Jared carefully pulled over to the shoulder of the road before turning in his seat and taking both his mate’s hands in his. “Start at the start, mo chroi,” he soothed. “Who’s JR?”

“I’m JR,” Jensen answered miserably, leaning forward to bury his face in the crook between Jared’s neck and shoulder. “Jensen Ross. JR. J-Ross. Whatever.”

It seemed like starting at the beginning had little to help with Jared’s confusion. “But I know you, baby,” he pointed out, feeling like he was missing a vital piece of a puzzle.

“You know me,” Jensen nodded his confirmation, still not bringing his face up. “But JR is not me. JR is who I had to become to survive back then.”

All at once, Jared’s breath stole from his lungs. He was an utter imbecile. “Baby…”
“You don’t get it, Jay!” Jensen pushed himself up, wide green eyes gazing at him as though Jensen were pleading for understanding even while he resigned himself to never getting it. “You’ve never been in the situations I’ve been in! I thank God for that,” he added, “but you also can’t expect to understand something you’ve never had to fathom.”

Jared stayed quiet. Hard enough as it was to admit, Jensen hit the nail on the head. Jared had grown up with doting parents, in a loving home-stead, with an iron-tight bond between not only himself and his kin, but also himself and his pack. He had been surrounded by love his entire life, and protected from feelings of neglect and pain and fear and isolation. When he was 9, he remembered, Jared had befriended his teacher’s son. The boy had gotten jumped by a gang of drunkards, and human as he was, he didn’t stand a chance. Those nights after, he remembered crawling into his father’s big leather chair- the important one that was in his study that they never got to sit in normally- and burrowing there while his superhero-dad soothed away his night terrors by growling fearsomely at his empty room. He remembered Jeff standing sentry as promised in his doorway, strong and protective before eventually passing out there, and he remembered Megan hopping neatly over his prone form to snuggle under the safety of Jared’s arm. They protected each other.

When Jensen was 9, he’d been pulling his dad from bars, braving the more-than-questionable dives to get him home, and doing God knows what to keep them from going under financially. He’d had no superhero to turn to, no sentry to trust and no loving cuddles that assured him that it was okay to be afraid. He had been alone, no matter where he turned, and it didn’t matter that Jared came from a more primal world; doubtlessly, Jensen came from a more painful one.

So yes. Jared couldn’t fathom what Jensen had been through on any scale. But…

“I can make sure you’re never alone in them again,” he murmured, framing Jensen’s beautiful face with his hands. “I may not able to comprehend, or imagine what you’ve been through, mo chroi. I may not be able to change the past and make sure you had someone to turn to then. But I can make damn certain of it, that you’re never left with no-one to fall back on again. I can see to it that you’re done having to be part of a world where you’re constantly getting hurt.”

The look Jensen gave him was torn, and Jared wondered, achingly desperate, what secrets those green orbs held. Not for the first time, he wondered whether his patience would be to his mate’s detriment, but what other choice was there? Jensen’s friends were as in the dark as he was, his father was probably too trashed to even notice when his son came home with bruises all over…Jared could see no other option that to wait it out.

He leaned forward to capture his mate’s full lips with his, nibbling lightly on his bottom lip until Jensen parted under his ministrations. Licking into Jen’s mouth, Jared reveled in the taste of his chroi, kneading Jensen’s jaw as he leisurely explored the wet, hot cavern of his mouth.

“You’re not going to like the guy I become the moment we get into that town’s borders,” Jensen warned him quietly one more time as they broke away.

“I fell in love with you, Jen,” Jared whispered right back, butting his nose against Jensen’s jaw in affection. “There’s no part of you that I won’t love with my heart and soul, baby. Besides, what matters to me is the person I know you are. My Jen,” he claimed with a smile, nudging Jensen’s temple with his nose again, eliciting a small sigh of contentment from his mate, who immediately leaned back into the contact. “My mate.”

Jensen surged forward at those words, throwing his arms around Jared’s neck and holding on for dear life. Jared returned the embrace fiercely, tucking the trembling boy under his chin and rubbing soothingly at his back, pressing light kisses to his hair and the nape of his neck.
“Promise me you won’t hate me for who I was then,” Jensen mumbled against his neck, sounding for all the world like a frightened child. It multiplied Jared’s protective instincts ten-fold, and he tightened his grip around his mate, making shushing noises and rocking them both gently until Jensen’s tremors subsided.

“I could never hate you, baby,” he murmured ardently. “I love you. I love you so much, more than the moon and the stars.”

Jensen peeked up at him, and Jared was happy to see the small smile on his mate’s face at the words.

“Love you forever and always, Jay,” he returned.

***

It was another half hour on the road before Jared saw it.

From his relaxed slump against the seat, Jensen gradually straightened and his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. His body was eerily still and his eyes sharpened, roving in calculated circles around them, on the lookout for a threat that Jared didn’t even know existed. Icy calm resonated from his tense posture even as the promise of danger rolled off him in waves.

It was an amazing sight to behold.

Jared’s tongue darted out to moisten his lower lip as his mate reached his hand to the side of his jean-clad leg. Jensen pulled out a small Swiss army knife and absentflicked a little button. Jared’s eyes widened as the gleaming silver blade snapped up with an ominous crack. He watched, motionless, as Jensen inspected the edge, running his thumb lightly along it. Jared frowned and reached out to stop him, unease at the thought of the blade piercing Jensen’s skin. Jensen sent him a tired smile, a shadow of his normally mischievous, sparkling grin.

“Why’re you carrying a knife?” Jared asked quietly. “Expecting trouble?”

“I always expect trouble,” Jensen answered honestly, running a hand through his short, dirty-blonde spikes. Jared raised an eyebrow questioningly. “It’s what’s kept me alive.”

Jared nodded slowly, pushing away his sadness and pity. “Do you carry it everywhere?”

“Not since I left this Godforsaken place,” Jensen assured him, and Jared took comfort from that. “But here? I always carry two knives, a pick, and a duster.”

Jared’s eyebrows reached into his hairline. “Where’s everything else?” he asked in disbelief.

“This knife was in a strap attached to my ankle,” Jensen held up the Swiss. “The lockpick is hidden in a stitched compartment on my jeans belt loop— which was a total bitch to make, trust me.” Jared’s lips quirked upwards in spite of his awe. “The duster is in my pocket,” Jensen continued, “and the other knife is here.” He reached into his shirt, and from a small holster hand-stitched into the shoulder of his shirt, he pulled out a long, slim knife. He expertly flicked his wrist and the blade swung out from the two prongs, and when he flicked it back, it swung gracefully back into it’s place. “It’s called a butterfly knife,” Jensen added, repeating the motion fluidly so that it flicked in, then out. In, then out. In, then out. He made it look effortless, but Jared had no doubt in his mind that he’d slice himself open if he had to try it.

“Can I have one?” he asked with a bright grin, comforted by the relief that made Jensen’s eyes smooth out.
“Most definitely not,” he replied cheerfully, smiling at Jared’s pout. “You’d hurt yourself.”

“Jen-sen,” Jared whined, his pout deepening. “I’m the Alpha of a pack of werewolves and one of the most respected and feared wolves in my pack.”

“That’s all well and good, Jay, but you’re not getting a knife,” Jensen replied serenely, eyes flicking once more over their surroundings.


“Don’t whine, Jay,” Jensen interrupted him, sending him a small grin that looked more like his own. “It’s unbecoming of the Alpha of a pack of werewolves and one of the most respected and feared wolves in your pack.”

Jared mock scowled, and it was worth it for the laugh it pulled from Jensen. He remained on guard though, and Jared wondered what exactly he was on the lookout for.

“Turn into the bar up ahead, will you?” Jensen requested quietly after a few minutes. “I need to find Aldis before we go to the motel.”

Jared nodded his assent and took in the brick building in front of him. It was in good condition, and from the amount of bikes in front of it, probably a majority biker-joint. A wooden sign hung in front, written on it in old English style print Cold Oaks.

As Jared parked, the door opened and a tall black guy walked out. He was lean, just on the point of being muscular, and his eyes softened with affection when Jensen hopped out of the car. The man grinned widely. “J-Ross!” he whooped, chuckling slightly, coming forward. Jared took a step closer to his boyfriend, unable to gauge whether he should be worried about the guy.

“It’s okay, Jay,” Jensen murmured, stepping around him and walking forward. The man enveloped him in a huge hug, thumping him on the back as Jensen repeated the motion. Jared frowned, possessiveness filling him.

“Been a while, man,” the guy clapped the side of Jensen’s face lightly.

“Has been,” Jensen agreed, coming back to stand next to Jared. “Jay, this is my old friend Aldis Hodge. He owns the bar. Al, this is my boyfriend, Jared.”

Jared smiled at Jensen’s openness, his initial jealousy assuaged. He reached over and shook the man’s hand firmly. “Nice to meet you, Aldis.”

“Naw, man, call me Dodge,” he grinned, returning the handshake. “I swear that name’s gonna catch eventually,” he protested, as Jensen threw his head back in laughter.

Jared smirked sympathetically. “If it helps, man, I’ll be sure to call you Dodge.”

“You.” Aldis pointed imperiously at him. “You, my man, just got yourself a free drink.”

Jared laughed, warming to the guy. “I’m gonna hold you to that.”

“Why don’t you go on in and help yourself?” Aldis suggested. “I gotta catch up with this man,” he made to ruffle Jensen’s hair, and his mate ducked away with a glare. “We’ll be there in a few.”

Jared looked at Jensen to see what his mate wanted. He swallowed his bitter disappointment when Jensen nodded minutely, going into the bar instead of protesting the way he wanted to.
The bar had an almost vintage vibe to it. The tables were round and the booths were cushioned, making it look a little like a diner. The bar was long with smooth granite tops, and a jukebox sat in the corner, nearby to a couple of pool tables. Jared headed towards the bar, spotting a few open chairs towards the end, when a dark haired guy stepped in front of him. He crossed his arms over his biceps, sneering, and Jared fought the urge to snarl. Revealing his Were here would be the single most dumbass move in the book, and he knew it.

“You look like you’re a long way from home, kid,” the man jeered, lips twisted in disdain. His buddies leered at him, and Jared tightened his muscles, wondering how the hell he was supposed to hold off 5 guys without shifting, getting badly hurt, or getting to Jensen, who would undoubtedly come to his side if this came to blows, to protect him.

“Why don’t you just calm down and leave me alone, man?” Jared tried to placate him, showing his palms in a gesture of peace. “I don’t wanna fight.”

“Well I don’t wanna leave you alone, kid,” he mocked, his inflection making Jared bristle with annoyance.

“Look, just get out of my face, asshole,” Jared snapped, drawing to his full height and glaring at the arrogant guy in front of him. A glint caught his eye and something sharp pressed against his shoulder. He tilted his head, seeing a small dagger in the guy’s hand, blade towards him. He paled, instinctively knowing that it was a silver dagger, and that could cause some real damage. His chest seized and he looked at the smirking guy.

“Not such a big mouth now, are you punk?” he sneered.

“Back off, Ty,” a voice drawled from behind Jared before he could answer. Jensen loped forward casually, only the hardness of his eyes indicating his worry for Jared. Panic gripped the alpha, however, as Jensen’s scar came to mind.

Heedless, Jensen strode forward, and it was then that he caught sight of the blade. His entire body stiffened instantly, and a dark look entered his eyes. Fury radiated off him, and the knife wielding asshat- Ty, Jensen had called him- was ignorant to it.

“JR is back in town?” he crowed, grinning excitedly at Jensen. “You got even prettier since you left, man, it’s been a while!”

Before Jared could growl at that, Jensen’s voice cut through, hard as steel and 10 degrees below freezing. “Not long enough that you forgot how much I hate repeating myself, Hoechlin?” he arched an eyebrow, fire blazing from his green eyes with the promise of pain. “I told you to back. The. Fuck. Off. Like, yesterday. He’s with me.”

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“He’s with…” Ty breathed, paling dramatically and snatching his hand away like the knife was burning him. “I didn’t know, man, I swear I didn’t. The ki-…um, he didn’t say nothing, I mean, I’m sorry JR.” Ty looked at Jared again, eyes widened, holding out a hand. “I’m sorry, man, I didn’t know you were with him,” he jerked a thumb at Jensen, ignoring Jared’s slack-jawed look of awe.

“You should say stuff like that, dude, nobody wants to piss JR off. But hey, I’m sorry, no hard feelings, yeah?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jared nodded, stupefied. “No hard feelings.”

Jensen rolled his eyes, seeming calmer. “You sure you’re okay, Jay?” he asked, voice soft and warm as always. Jared nodded, and Jensen released a breath in relief, before scowling once more and turning a frigid voice towards the dark haired guy. “Buzz off, Ty, before I remember that I was
pissed as all hell at you for that moronic stunt. And spread the word, no one touches Jared, or they’ll have to answer to me.”

Ty nodded frantically, heading off quickly with his now-silent pals. Jared raised his eyebrows in question, and Jensen smiled sheepishly.

“I have a reputation,” he shrugged. “Just stay close from now. Gangs and gang districts are pretty different to what you’re used to.”

“You’re the one who wanted me to leave,” Jared couldn’t help pointing out testily. Jensen bit his lip guiltily.

“I’m sorry about that, Jay,” he apologized regretfully. “Aldis doesn’t like talking in front of people he doesn’t know, and I really needed to know what he knew about my father.”

Jared felt his irritation melt away, feeling bad for snapping at his mate when he obviously didn’t need the extra worry. “No, I’m sorry, baby,” he rubbed the back of his head ruefully. “I’m not priority at the moment, your dad is. What did Aldis tell you?”

“Not here,” Jensen shook his head, speaking almost inaudibly. “Everyone here is like a vulture. They’ll jump at any sign of weakness.”

“Gotta protect your street cred,” Jared grinned, excited now that he got over his shock of his boyfriend being the resident badass. “Man, you had that guy quivering in his boots, Jen!”

“Tyler Hoechlin is all bark,” Jensen rolled his eyes, sparing a fond glance for Jared. “Besides, after what happened with Adam, I was taught how to fight from the best.”

“I know,” Jared enthused. “You took Jake out.”

“You could try not to sound so gleeful about me breaking Abel’s nose, Jay,” Jensen absently reprimanded as he scoped out the bar once more. Jared marveled again at the change in him.

“Oh, but I was,” he smirked. “Gleeful, that is. Jake had it coming for years.”

“No arguments there,” Jensen allowed, hands ghosting over his knives for reassurance. Jared noticed and frowned in concern.

“Why are you so on guard?” he asked quietly, as they sat at the bar. Jensen smiled briefly and raised a hand in greeting at the bartender before turning his attention back to the Alpha.

“I haven’t been here in a while, and I just want to be sure that people still treat me with the same respect they used to,” he shrugged. “If they don’t I want to be prepared to remind them why they really should.”

Jared whistled low under his breath. “Maybe you weren’t the one I should’ve been worried for,” he teased with a smirk.

Jensen grinned wolfishly. “What I’ve been trying to tell you from the start, Jay.”

~*Jensen*~

Jensen was edgy.
He knew that no one at the bar was stupid enough to try him, but if, on the off chance, someone did, how could he protect Jared from that? He would never forget the throat crushing terror that seized him when he saw the glint of that silver blade pressed against his boyfriend’s gut. He’d wanted to shove his own knife straight into Tyler’s throat. Not for the first time, he wondered about the logic of bringing Jared with him, because his boyfriend couldn’t shift to save himself, and now, Jensen wasn’t so sure about his own ability to protect him. He vowed at that moment to shield Jared from the more violent area of gang life, but it would help if…

“No. Fucking. Way.”

Jensen’s breath caught in his throat as the disbelieving voice carried across the bar to him. He turned, a smile blooming on his face.

“Hey, Matty,” he half-grinned. “Been a while.”

The responding smile could have been seen in space, Jensen was sure. Matt Bomer had been his mentor and protector when he started out in this life, and of everyone, he was the saddest to leave Matt behind.

His dark-haired mentor crossed the room in a few strides, gathering him in a massive hug. Some of his old gang followed, all of them hugging him and welcoming him home. Warmth filled him, and he relaxed knowing his backup was there. Taking his seat next to Jared, he could feel the other boy’s jealousy, and exasperated affection made his chest warm.

“Jay, this is Matt, one of my oldest buddies here,” he introduced them, before going around the group. “This is Chuck, Spike, Cory, Andy and Horatio. Guys, this is my boyfriend, Jared.” Once again, the tall Alpha seemed to relax at Jensen’s public acknowledgement that they were together, and Jensen smirked inwardly. On the other hand, it looked like Matt had swallowed a lemon. Jensen shrugged it off as a protectiveness he’d never outgrow.

Matt caught him up on what had gone on in his absence while Jared seemed to be bonding with Andy and Spike over football. Jensen stayed on his guard, but after a half hour, he was exhausted. It had been a long and emotionally taxing day, and he was just about ready to crash. He mentally catalogued all the motels close-by that had some semblance of a good standard. He didn’t want Jared to be uncomfortable after he’d driven him so far and stuck with him through all this crap.

“Listen, Al, we’re gonna clear out,” he called to his friend as he jogged towards them. Shrugging his leather jacket on over his plaid overshirt, Jensen sent his boyfriend a half-smile. Jared grinned at him and came to stand next to him. He nodded minutely, silently commending the boy for remembering the no-hugging rule Jensen had implemented in the car.

_Badasses_ didn’t _cuddle._

“Later, Dodge,” Jared gave him a mini-salute and Jensen rolled his eyes at the excitement in Aldis’ face.

“No way, JR,” Aldis held up a hand. “No chance you and my man Jared are sleeping in a motel. My mama raised me better than that, you’re bunking at my place.”

“C’mon, Al, we’ll be fine,” Jensen waved him off with a smile.

“I don’t care, man, do you know how many vile things lurk in motel rooms? Too many, J-Ross, that’s how many!” he ranted with a small shudder. “Now,” he turned to an amused Jared. “You with me, aint that right, Jay-Red?”
Jared was grinning like a kid with a new toy. “Sure, man,” he agreed enthusiastically. Jensen looked at him incredulously and he shrugged happily. “I like nicknames.”

Jensen couldn’t help the laugh the bubbled in him, and he couldn’t care less about the shocked looks it generated from his gang. None of them had heard him laugh properly, save for Matt and Aldis.

“Look, Al, you sure about this?” he asked his friend. “We really would be fine getting a motel room.”

“I think you should go to Dodge’s,” Matt piped up suddenly, leveling an even stare at Jared. “In separate rooms.”

Jensen frowned at the words while Jared glared right back. Making a mental note to kick Matty’s ass for being so overprotective, he smiled thinly at Aldis. “Breakfast’s on me, then.”

“Whoop!” Aldis cheered, breaking the tension. “I get a J-Ross-Breakfast-Special! Suck it, bitches!”

He wondered idly whether Aldis knew he’d effectively ensured that the whole gang would turn up at his place the next morning, and promptly decided he didn’t want to be the one to break that news.

###

“So, my badass baby,” Jared cooed, nuzzling his neck as they curled up in bed. Jensen laughed softly, swatting at Jared’s hands lightly as they came to wrap around his waist, spooning him. “You’re the one people are afraid of, huh?”

Jensen traced light trails along the strong forearms cuddling him. “Did it bother you?” he asked uncertainly. It had killed him the way he’d been too preoccupied looking out for threats to read Jared’s reactions, but he figured a safe and pissed off Jared was better than an injured and amicable one.

“Yes, and no,” Jared replied after a long moment of contemplation. “It bothers me that you had to become the guy with the street cred to make sure you were safe, but it doesn’t bother me that you are. If that makes sense.” He pressed a small kiss to the nape of Jensen’s neck. “I hate that you had to be in a gang, but it doesn’t change anything between us since you’re not really that guy.”

“God,” Jensen released a breath he didn’t even know he was holding, “I love you.”

Jared chuckled lightly, nuzzling into the side of his bared throat. Just before he could drift off into a comfortable sleep, his boyfriend’s voice drifted over him. “Baby?”

“Mm?” he tried to rouse slightly.

“What’s the plans for tomorrow?”

“Crash a bar, hustle pool with hulked-out bikers, rescue my dad and do it all without pissing people off.”

“Piece of cake,” Jared deadpanned. Jensen laughed breathlessly, snuggling deeper into his arms.

“I got you, Jay,” he mumbled happily. “It will be.”

###
On this note, guys, give poor Jared a break! XD It made me laugh how many people wanted Jared to open his eyes and see the truth, but I wanted to focus on the reality that sometimes, people just can't, or don't want to consider the hardcore stuff as a possibility. I'd like to emphasize that Jared is an innocent in terms of the hardships of the world, so give him a while! Poor baby still has his head in the sand! XD Thanks again, guys! Hope you enjoyed!

-JayGirl
Dredging up the past

Chapter Notes

Once again, a huge thank you to everyone for your comments, kudos and love! Thank you especially to everyone who expressed their concern about my little accident! It truly warmed my heart!

Hope you enjoy this chapter!

Shout out to Werewolf-hottie, a new reader, and Kyle, an old reader recently commenting. Also a big shout out to the rest everyone reading silently along with us! Thanks for sticking with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

It was almost like he had never left.

Jensen’s eyes popped open, immediately awake. Jared’s body was still wrapped around him, and a sliver of fear hit home when he realized he had more to lose than he did before he left this life behind. That in mind, he slipped out from underneath Jared, taking his knife out from under the mattress with him, intent on finding out what had broken his admittedly light sleep.

There.

A slight rustle, nothing more, but enough to have roused him from sleep. Jensen remembered when he had to get used to that, because God knew there was no better opportunity for an ambush than during your target’s sleep. Crouching low, he regulated his breathing until it was soundless, then crept towards the window, his bare feet silent on the tiled floor. A shadow threw across the back wall, and Jensen tightened his grip on the handle of the blade. Pressing himself against the wall, he waited patiently, using all his experience to tamp down the fear he felt for the boy sleeping across the room from him.

A figure clad in black opened the window, and it barely made a squeak. Someone who knew Aldis, then. Knew that you had to press on a spot on the window pane to stop it from making noise as it slid up. A leg and head popped through, and that was all Jensen needed. He pressed the tip of the blade against the intruder’s throat, sliver glinting menacingly in the moonlight.

“Move a muscle and my knife will be getting up close and personal with your voice box,” he stated quietly, his even voice made more dangerous by its softness. The figure chuckled, and Jensen nearly dropped with relief at the familiar sound.

“And here I was thinking you’d probably gotten rusty, or soft. I stand corrected,” Matt smirked. Jensen scowled, dropping his posture and shoving the knife in the waistband of his sweats.

“How about you test me without putting your life in danger next time?” he asked sarcastically.
“Bitch, bitch, bitch, that’s all you’re doing at the moment, JR,” Matt grinned. Jensen thought he was entirely entitled to the sucker punch to the gut.

He went to Jared while Matt spluttered and wheezed in the background. “Jay?” he called out softly. “Wake up. We have company.” He flicked the lamp on and shook his boyfriend’s shoulders lightly, running one hand through his hair soothingly to alleviate any worry Jared might have.

“Jen? You okay, baby?” he asked, sitting up. He rubbed his eyes, looking adorably little, and Jensen suppressed the urge to coo. He pressed a kiss to Jared’s temple and nodded.

“I’m okay. Late night visitor,” he jerked his head to where Matt was still trying to recover from his sucker punch. Jared cocked his head to look, eyes narrowing when they fell on Matt. He sat up, angling his body to cover Jensen some, and Jensen shook his head in amusement at the reaction.

“What do you want?” Jared asked suspiciously.

“Good job protecting him,” Matt commented instead, sneering slightly. “I could have killed him twice before you woke up. Steller.”

“Don’t be a dick, Matty,” Jensen butted in smoothly, before Jared could lose his temper. “You know as well as I do that no one is stupid enough to try to break into Aldis’ place. Except obviously you. And besides, I can take care of myself.”

“I know that. Did he?” Matt asked almost accusingly.

“I know Jensen better than anyone,” Jared answered, winding an arm around him, and Jensen wondered when this discussion had become remotely territorial.

“That’s what you think,” Matt raised an eyebrow smugly. “I don’t suppose you told him about Adam, JR? You know, seeing as how it took you two years to tell us.”

Jensen was suddenly overwhelmingly glad he’d come clean about Adam earlier, seeing as how Matt’s endeavor didn’t protect his privacy. He was also abundantly grateful he’d never told the gang about Eric.

“As a matter of fact, I do know about Adam,” Jared returned evenly. Jensen was pretty sure he was the only one who saw the smugness hidden in his boyfriend’s eyes, but Jensen elbowed him anyway.

“Now, if both of you would consent to having your dick-measuring contest at a later stage, I’d like to know the fucking awesome reason for disturbing my sleep in the middle of the fucking night,” Jensen injected acerbically. Matt’s face flashed guiltily.

“I missed you,” he muttered, his reddened face visible even in the muted light. “Wanted to see you.”

Jensen waited a beat, taking that in. He knew there was something on his old friend, mentor and protector’s mind, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it. “Go back to sleep, Jay,” he whispered, kissing Jared softly. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Jensen…” Jared began to protest, but Jensen leveled him with a pleading stare. “Okay,” he finally relented, pulling Jensen into his body for a long, passionate kiss, just the wrong side of too-dirty-for-public. “Hurry back,” he mumbled, smirking at the dazed look on Jensen’s face.

The green-eyed boy cursed under his breath, pulling away from his boyfriend and going to the door of the bedroom. “Sitting room,” he threw out over his shoulder, and he assumed Matt got the
message when he began to follow.

Settling himself on the bean-bag chair in the corner of the room, Jensen waited patiently while Matt tried to decide where to sit. When he finally opted to crash in the second bean-bag chair, next to Jensen, he adjusted himself so he could face his friend.

“What’s up, Matty?” he asked gently. “And don’t say you were worried for my safety. One, Al’s place is safer than a police station. Two, you were one of them who helped train me. I can put anyone in a 30-mile radius on their ass faster than any of you. And three, after all this time, don’t you think I know you better than that?”

Matt smiled softly at him, affection in his eyes. “You know me better than anyone, JR,” he nodded quietly. “But sometimes you don’t see the most obvious of things. Now, tell me how you’ve been holding up? How’s the new place? Anyone hassling you?”

“No one,” Jensen shook his head with a smile. “I kind of like the new place, you know? Made a couple good friends. Don’t have to watch my back every time I leave the house.”

Matt winced. “I’m glad, man.”

“Don’t do that,” Jensen mumbled, seeing the pain on his friend’s face and realizing how his words could have been interpreted. “You know I don’t think that this place was all bad. I had you guys watching out for me, I never forgot that.”

“I know,” Matt soothed. “I don’t feel anything but glad that you got out of here, JR. You deserved so much better than this life.”

“I appreciate that coming from you,” Jensen phrased his words carefully, “but then…why didn’t you bother to phone? I expected it from everyone else, but I thought you’d call.”

“Figured it would be best if you forgot about me,” Matt shrugged.

“You took me under your wing when I first came here,” Jensen stated. “Taught me how to fight. Got other people to help me fight. Helped me learn how to defend myself and take care of myself. Gave me a family. How could I ever forget you?” Jensen paused. “You’re my brother, man.” For some reason, Matt flinched a little at the words, triggering Jensen’s curiosity.

“JR,” Matt spoke slowly, “you know that I care about you a lot, right?”

Jensen nodded, feeling like he should be readying himself for something, he just didn’t know what.

“Just, the way that I care about you…is less brother, and more…”

“Jay-Ross in the house!”

Whatever Matt had planned on saying was drowned out by Aldis crashing through the front door, likely having given the bar to Eli to handle for the rest of the night. The man stopped in his tracks, cocking his head as he aimed a stare at them.

“Am I interrupting something?”

“You’re a douchebag,” Matt groaned, glaring at Aldis, who was smirking in satisfaction. Jensen chuckled at the exchange. He propelled himself up, knowing that whatever Matt had wanted to say would probably remain bottled up inside him until they were alone next. Covering his mouth as he yawned, he made his way to the bedroom, waving absently at his friends. Aldis and Matt’s argument
over who was a bigger douchebag faded into the background behind him. He shook his head fondly.

*Idiots.*

~*Jared*~

Jared couldn’t help his sigh of relief when Jensen came back into the room. He sat up, and Jensen grinned at him, coming to cuddle up in his arms. As Jared arranged himself around Jensen, spooning as they were before, he could thank his wolf-hearing for the hushed voices he heard from the living room.

“I was about to…”

“I know, Matt! I know!” That was Aldis’ voice. “I know you were gonna declare your undying love for the kid!” Jared growled low in his chest at that, and Jensen aimed a curious look at him. He kissed his mate’s forehead until it smoothed out with his smile.

“Then why’d you stop me?” Matt was asking. And Jared really wanted that answer too.

“Because it’s JR, man. I love that kid, he’s like a brother to me. Now, with this Jared dude? That’s the first time I seen JR happy since we met him. I aint about to let you ruin this for him because you grew a pair since he left.”

Jared figured it would be easy to decide which of Jensen’s old friends he liked best.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Jensen mumbled into his shoulder, where he was snuggling his head.

“Everything,” Jared whispered, partly truthfully. He hesitated, the questions on the tip of his tongue, but he was worried to ask for fear of hurting Jensen.

“You’re gonna sprain something if you keep overthinking this,” Jensen commented dryly. “Ask me, Jay. I love you, and I know you don’t want to hurt me, but it’s gonna hurt you to wonder about JR and not have any answers.”

Jared nodded, pressing little kisses to Jensen’s shoulders while he thought about everything he wanted to know. “Matt was your mentor?”

“Yeah,” Jensen nodded, shifting until he was snuggled deeper in Jared’s embrace. “He basically took me in when we moved here, taught me how to live…this life.”

“Why you?” he asked, unable to help the petulance in his tone. Thankfully, Jensen didn’t hear it, or if he did, he chose to tactfully ignore it.

“I asked him the same thing. Matt said it was because of the way I mouthed off to him when we first met. It was at a bar a couple blocks from Cold Oaks,” Jensen answered before he could ask. “I hustled him at pool and he wanted to beat my ass black and blue, so I told him that if doing that would help his non-existent pool skills, then he was welcome to, by all means.” Jensen chuckled. “He said I had more fire than half the guys in his crew, and he wanted to make sure no one took that from me in a moment of anger or resentment.”

Jared nodded slowly, processing the information. “What do you think our chances are of getting away from the people who your dad owes without causing a fight?”
“Yours are 100% because you’re not coming into the bar with me,” Jensen said tartly. Jared growled his displeasure.

“The hell I’m not!” He sat up slightly to look into his mate’s eyes. “I’m not leaving you with them.”

“I can handle them, Jay,” Jensen protested. “What I can’t handle is the thought of you getting hurt for Eric’s...or my own mistakes.”

Jared took a deep breath, trying to find the words that would explain what he felt. “What makes you think that I’m any more okay with the thought of you being remotely hurt? Baby, I may not be as street-smart as you, and I may not be able to kick ass when I’m not in wolf form, but I can still help. In whatever way I can. Don’t ask me to, because I can’t let you go there without me.”

“And I can’t let you take a knife or a bullet for me,” Jensen whispered, anguish permeating his voice. “When I saw Tyler with that blade against you...God, I wanted to kill him. Do you have any idea how terrified I was? It would have been on my head if you had gotten hurt. You don’t belong in this world, Jay.”

Jared raised his hand to caress Jensen’s jaw, trying to soothe away the tension that was rapidly building in his mate. “Would you blame me,” he asked slowly, “if a lone wolf hurt you on my packlands?”

“Never,” Jensen answered promptly, brow furrowing at the change of topic before his face took on the brightness of understanding. He scowled. “Not fair, Jay, that’s not...”

“Not the same?” Jared interrupted, raising an eyebrow. “You don’t belong in the Were world any more than I belong in the gang world. You’re there, because you love me. I’m here, because I love you. It isn’t your fault Tyler pulled a knife on me.”

Jensen was quiet for a moment, absorbing this. “Where the blame lay wouldn’t have mattered if something had happened to you. But I see what you mean.”

“You’ll let me come?” Jared couldn’t help but feel hopeful.

“Not unless one of my friends are there to bodyguard,” Jensen stipulated. “I’m not asking,” he warned, when Jared made to protest. “I put up with you asking everyone and the school faculty to keep an eye on me. I think I’m being more than reasonable.”


“Great. Now,” Jensen yawned, “anything else you want to ask before I cuddle you like a teddy bear and sleep for about 10 hours?”

Jared chuckled quietly. “Just one.” He hesitated, hoping fervently that he wouldn’t upset his mate. “Mo chroi, this...thing, that bullies you back home, the one you refuse to tell me or Chris about, why won’t you fight him the way you fight everyone else?”

“For one, don’t get cantankerous about me being tight-lipped. Not like you and Chris aren’t trying to launch your own covert operation in an attempt to find out anyway.” Jensen replied archly. Jared blushed at being caught out.

“You haven’t left us much choice,” he retorted sullenly. “And if it helps, Chad’s on board too. He knows no details, all he really needed to hear was ‘someone hurt Jensen’ and he was ready for action. Funny, for someone who was so wary of you at the start.”
“Me and Chad had a heart-to-heart,” Jensen shrugged by way of explanation. “My point is that if you go knocking on doors, and people close them, sometimes you shouldn’t try to bulldoze your way through. Some doors are kept closed for a reason.”

“I know you’re trying to protect me, Jen. But from what?”

~*Jensen*~

From what, indeed.

And that answer was simpler than it ought to have been. Aside from the pain of knowing and the angst from not being able to help much, he really just wanted to spare Jared’s innocence.

Despite the fact that Jared had come from a world with a history of bloodshed, the alpha himself had not been exposed to the horrors that lay beyond the Were kingdom. He may not have seen it that way, but he had been sheltered, the proof of that lying in the fact that Jared never expected those bruises to have come from Eric. Even Chris, who had seen his parents murdered in cold blood, hadn’t yet put the dots together. Neither boy had ever been exposed to the reality that sometimes the worst evil comes from the ones we love. In theory, they knew it happened, but they had never been in a situation where the people you called family were the ones hurting you.

Maybe it was naïve of him, and Jensen was willing to wear that label if it was, but he didn’t want to create a whole new darkness to Jared’s universe. He didn’t want to be the reason that Jared would be looking over his shoulder, doubtful and untrusting…like Jensen himself was.

Selfish, but not entirely so.

“I’m trying to protect you from my demons,” Jensen answered, half-truthfully.

Maybe Jared could sense that he wasn’t ready for this topic, or maybe he just accepted the answer and was planning his appropriate rebellion against it silently, but whatever it was, it made him stop pushing. Jared gently turned him back around so that his back pressed flush against Jared’s chest, while the Alpha’s hand curled possessively around his waist, the other cushioning Jensen’s head. Jared nuzzled the side of his jaw, nipping playfully and sucking and licking small stripes over random hiccups until finally, Jensen relaxed under the affectionate ministrations.

“So why don’t you fight back?” Jared returned to his original question.

Jensen sighed, wondering the best way to phrase the reasoning he’d used on himself his whole life. “I guess that I want to be different,” he answered eventually, cringing internally at the way it sounded. “I just mean that I don’t want to be the same person my…bully, is,” he stumbled a little on the word and its lie. “If I fight back, doesn’t that make me just the same as the person fighting me?”

“No,” Jared refuted promptly. “You’re fighting back in self-defense.”

Jensen wanted to argue, but his only reasons for not retaliating was that Eric was always drunk, and it wouldn’t be a fair fight if one party was inebriated, and also that he couldn’t bring himself to raise a hand to someone he once loved. He’d grown up having nothing but love and respect and admiration for the man. He couldn’t find it in himself to fight back, not only for the agony it would cause Jody if she were there to see it.

“The person who attacked me was drunk,” he finally settled for a half-truth. “It wouldn’t have been fair if I had fought back.”
“That’s ridiculous, baby,” Jared maintained stubbornly. “If he’s sober enough to hurt you, he’s sober enough to get his ass kicked.”

Jensen turned around in his boyfriend’s arms, bringing his hands up to frame Jared’s face. “I love you for worrying this much about me,” he said instead. “I don’t know what I would do without you. I’d probably still be…this guy, I’d probably still be JR. I haven’t told you this in so many words, but thank you, Jay. For everything. You saved me from being JR the rest of my life, whether you knew it or not.” Jensen pressed his lips against Jared’s, humming contentedly when the boy’s hand drifted down to grope covetously at the curve of his ass. He rolled his hips lazily into Jared’s, cock swelling as he pressed against Jared’s rapidly hardening member. Jared rolled on to his back, pulling Jensen to lie on top of him, and Jensen mumbled against his mouth; “You’re my Jay-Star.”

Jared’s hazel eyes popped open and Jensen saw nothing but love, lust and devotion there. Jared nosed his way down Jensen’s jaw, nuzzling and occasionally nipping along the way, until he got to the hollow of Jensen’s throat. Angling his head up, Jared sucked a deep mark into his skin, making Jensen pant as he finally let the bruised skin go. Reaching down, Jared pushed his sweats down over his cock, doing the same to his own and both of them moaning when hard, hot flesh finally came into contact.

“You have to be quiet baby,” Jared rumbled, his voice low and deep. One big hand spread the pre-come steadily leaking from the head of Jensen’s dick and combined it with Jared’s pre-come, before gripping both their erections and stroking them together, hard and fast. Jensen gasped at the sensation and drove his hips downwards in an attempt for more contact, biting lightly on Jared’s shoulder to stop himself from moaning as loudly as he wanted to.

As Jared stripped their cocks relentlessly, he palmed Jensen’s ass with his other hand, squeezing the mounds of flesh punishingly. Without warning, he slipped a finger in the crease of Jensen’s ass, one hot digit brushing teasingly against his now aching hole.

Jensen arched his back, a keening sound escaping him that Jared quickly swallowed with a kiss. Insistently, Jared pushed his finger slowly into Jensen’s tight channel, fucking his tongue in and out of Jensen’s mouth in a dirty imitation of what they both really wanted to be doing.

“So fucking hot like this, baby,” Jared groaned into his mouth. “So fucking beautiful. Mine, you’re fucking mine…only desperate for me, aren’t you baby? Want my cock, don’t you? Want me to fuck you, show everyone who you belong to?”

“Fuck, yes, Jay,” Jensen whimpered, moving one hand to join Jared’s on their cocks. He buckled wildly as Jared worked his finger further in, unable to decide which he liked better; the finger filling his hole or the hand stroking his cock. “More,” he pleaded mindlessly, finding that the probing against his tight walls was by far one of the hottest things he could imagine. “Please, more. Please, Jay, I can take it.”

“Look so fucking pretty when you beg for me,” Jared whispered filthily. “Gonna stretch you, baby, like it’s gonna stretch you when you take my cock up your ass,” he promised lustily, pressing two fingers against Jensen’s hole now. Jensen keened, taking over and working their slippery cocks when Jared moved his hand to pull apart Jensen’s cheeks. Slowly, he pushed further in, and Jensen was never so inclined to be thankful for Jared’s long fingers.

“So full, Jay, you feel so good,” he groaned, rubbing their erections almost painfully in his desperation. “I need to come, Jay, please let me come.”

“Do it, baby, come for me,” Jared growled, rolling his hips faster and his fingers going deeper. “Come for me, now,” he commanded lowly, just as his fingers brushed up against the bundle of
nerves that sent white sparking across Jensen’s vision. He gasped at the mind-numbing pleasure and came all over his hand and Jared’s stomach. Jared rutted against him, following not long after as hot come painted both their bodies white. Jensen’s limbs turned to jelly and he flopped on to Jared’s body, heedless of the come cooling on them. Jared seemed to content to stay there for a while as he lazily played with Jensen’s still sensitive hole, making the green-eyed boy moan with stimulation.

After a few minutes, Jared removed his fingers and Jensen whimpered quietly at the loss. Jared turned them over and left for a few minutes, coming back with a wet cloth and gently cleaning Jensen as he lay there, blissed out.


“Love you, baby,” he butted his nose against Jensen’s temple. “More than the moon and the stars.”

“Forever and always,” Jensen managed to get out, before sleep assaulted him.

His last conscious thought was ‘that was a whole lot more fun than answering that question.’

~*Jared*~

JR was a phenomenon if Jared had ever seen one.

In a way, seeing this gangster part of Jen was sort of like how it must have been for Jensen seeing Jared’s wolf form. Fundamentally, they were the same, but mind-sets? They couldn’t have been more different.

Jensen was protective of him normally, Jared knew that much, just as much as Jared was protective of Jensen. JR, however, took things to a new level. He was constantly on guard, and was always with Jared, not that he minded that. To an extent, JR didn’t even trust Aldis and Matt with Jared, and that touched the Alpha as well as amused him. The only time Jared protested his mate’s protectiveness was every time the door opened, because Jen immediately placed himself in front of Jared in response, hands resting over where Jared now knew his knife was stashed. It rubbed his inner Alpha up the wrong way not to be the one shielding his mate, but he forced himself to entertain it; he had to, if he had a hope of Jensen letting him stay, and accompany him to the bar to get his dad.

Being that it was a bar that they didn’t frequent, Jensen, Aldis, Matt, Horatio, Spike and Jared were seated around a table, trying to figure out a way in for Jensen that wouldn’t result in him having to prove his worth, and who he was. Jensen made it clear that he wasn’t above making his point, but even he knew it would be an ideal situation for him to appear docile in front of whoever he was going to hustle.

“Which security company does the bar use?” Jensen asked suddenly. His mate had been quiet for several moments, lost in thought, and Jared was intrigued as to what he’d been plotting.

Aldis looked through the leaf of papers on the table in front of them, detailing all they could dredge up about Kenny’s Keg in the past few hours. “Winchester Armed Responses. Family business, opened up a hell of a time ago. Owners are two brothers, taking over from their retired father. One works the business, other is a silent partner and the company lawyer.”

Jensen perked up, a look of disbelief in his eyes. “Winchester? As in, Dean Winchester?”
Jared felt a rush of irrational jealousy. “You know him?” he asked, at the same time that Aldis nodded with an affirming, “Yeah.”

“When I was a kid, there was this criminal targeting kids. Eric was out on business and Dean came to our place worried that the sicko might come after me. I helped him catch the perp,” Jensen explained absently, scanning the page with the information quickly.

Jared’s heart jumped into his throat as the implied words behind that revelation made themselves heard in his mind. “You acted as bait?” he half-yelled. “What in the hell was that guy thinking?!”

“I made the choice,” Jensen stated serenely. “I wasn’t going to let another kid get hurt because I was chicken-shit.”

Jared huffed a frustrated breath, wondering how many Gods he had to thank for making sure his mate got to him in one piece. “How is any security feed gonna help anyway?” he groused.

“I can scout the patrons out,” his mate explained, raising his eyes to meet theirs. “See if I can spot someone who might be willing to help me, or at least someone that could be persuaded.”

“Make the call,” Matt nodded, looking appeased with the plan.

It warmed Jared’s heart when Jensen turned to him, green eyes serious as he laid a palm over his thigh. “You alright with this, Jay?” he asked softly. It amazed Jared that Jensen considered him enough a part of this to include him. He smiled wearily and grasped Jensen’s hand.

“I trust you to know what the best move is,” he answered simply, and Jensen grinned in relief, flipping open his phone.

“Hey Dean, this is JR. I need to ask you a small favor…”

###

As it turned out, Dean Winchester was a lot more connected than they originally planned. After Jensen spoke to him and explained the situation in the baldest way, Dean revealed that he was friends with the owner, a guy named Benny. Dean agreed to give the guy a call and see if he’d be willing to help them, and they arranged to meet Dean at a diner in the CBD to get the verdict.

The guy was attractive, in a rugged sort of way. Age had served him well, and although the man had obviously seen some shit in life, he had the sort of smile reserved for Jensen that made it seem like he had a softer side, untainted by the darkness.

He gave Jensen a hug and shook Jared’s hand, casting a somewhat speculative glance over him before nodding almost absently.

“I’m going to go tell the waitress to add two more coffees,” Jensen announced, dropping his jacket over the back of his chair and walking up to the counter.

“You seem alright, kid,” Dean spoke with quiet conviction, the voice of a soldier that didn’t waste words, so Jared listened carefully. Dean appraised him once more, nodding more pronounced this time. “I look for reasons to fire my gun,” he spoke matter-of-factly. “Don’t become one of them by hurting him.”

“Understood,” Jared tried to restrain his smirk. It seemed that Jensen could turn the worst of badasses into marshmallows.
Suddenly, a female voice, high and with a slight twang, rang out in the diner. “Jensen?” The word spoken as a gasp made all three of them turn, Jensen’s face paling dramatically. A woman with bright green eyes stared at Jensen, who seemed to have stopped breathing. Jared was at his mate’s side in a second, motionless spell broken at the sight of Jensen’s wide, frightened eyes.

“Aunt Katherine?”

~*Jensen*~
****

“Do you have any memories of your parents?”

Jensen turned in Jared’s arms as they sat spooned together on the sofa, the closing credits of The Titanic playing behind him. Looping his arms around his boyfriend’s shoulders, he nodded slowly, flashes of images painting his eyelids every time he shut them.

“Some. I was only 2 when they died, so sometimes I’m not sure if what I’m remembering is a memory, is just something my mind conjured up because I was desperate to remember something.”

Jared nuzzled him, sympathy softening his hazel brown eyes. “Tell me some of them?” he requested gently.

“Well,” Jensen thought hard, “I remember a song. Well, a part of a song. If I close my eyes and concentrate real hard, I could swear I hear a woman singing it. I only know the line ‘For one so small, you seem so strong. My arms will hold you, keep you safe and warm.’ I googled it later on, found the original song. I remember a park.” He shook his head slightly, as though that would help him recall the details. “It had a huge tunnel slide that I used to love going down, and these swings so wide that my mom used to sit with me sometimes and we’d swing together. I remember having a lot of toy cars, my dad would always play with them with me, and whenever he was busy with the car, I was outside with him.” Jensen smiled in fond memory. “I had an imaginary friend too, I think. He was older than me, and we had the same hair but different eyes. His name was Josh. I remember my Aunt Katherine coming to visit once and buying Josh a present too. I think my mom must have told them all to encourage my vivid imagination.”

Jared’s puzzled look stopped his trip down memory lane. “Aunt Katherine?” Jared repeated. “Jen, who is this Aunt Katherine?”

“My mom’s sister,” Jensen replied, peering at Jared’s scrunched up face from underneath his lashes. “She lives in the same place Eric, Jody and I used to live, before coming here. She’s there with her husband, Hank.”

“Oh-kay,” Jared dragged the word out. “But baby, if you have biological, immediate family, then how did you end up in foster care?”

Jensen visibly flinched, hiding his head in Jared’s broad chest. “My aunt and uncle had, quote unquote, no time to waste entertaining and looking after a baby.”

Jensen felt the rumble against his cheek as Jared growled low in his chest. “I’m so sorry baby.” His softly murmured words contradicted the fury pulsing through his veins.

“The last memory I have of my Aunt Katherine was her looking at the social worker and saying those words,” Jensen whispered in anguish. “She didn’t even look at me once. Like I wasn’t even
worth that much. If I never see her again, it will still be too soon.”

*****

The words played in Jensen’s mind as he replayed the memory in his head. Jared tensed next to him, obviously remembering the day as well, and recognizing the name.

His aunt came to him almost carefully, as though she were afraid she was in some kind of dream. Jensen steeled himself, reverting back to JR in an attempt to ward off any pain she could still inflict.

“Jensen, honey,” she whispered again in disbelief as she came closer. Jared placed himself in front of Jensen, and not for the first time, the green-eyed boy was thankful for his boyfriend’s possessiveness and protectiveness. She stopped in her tracks, aiming a wide-eyed, pleading look past Jared, at him.

“Can I… God, can I please hug you?” she asked brokenly, tears falling from her eyes.

Jared looked at him over his shoulder, asking clearly whether Jensen wanted him to step aside. Against his better judgement and thanks in large part to the voice of a woman singing You’ll Be In My Heart, he nodded, and was promptly bowled over by the woman. She was hugging him desperately, hiccupping sobs racking her frame as she ran her hands through his hair and down his arms, like she was trying to prove he was real. She cupped his face in her hands, planting kisses on his cheeks and forehead. Jensen stood stock-still, frozen with shock, only her vanilla scent and the affection in her movements penetrating his fog of awareness.

“Oh, my darling little boy,” she was whispering now. “Oh, my sweetheart, my Jensen, oh, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry.”

These words more than anything else pulled Jensen from his stupor, and he took her wrists gently in his hands to stop her, a stony mask coming over his face to hide his emotions. “I’d rather you didn’t,” he said in a detached voice, hardening himself against the wave of pain her crumpling face brought.

“I’ve been looking for you for 14 years, Jensen,” she told him desperately. “I made a mistake, honey, please believe me. I’ve spent every day since CS took you from me regretting the choice I made. I was grief-stricken, I had just lost my sister…”

“And I just lost both my parents,” Jensen interrupted hardly. “I was a child that had just lost everything they ever knew. You took that last shred of familiarity away from me, and you didn’t even have the courtesy of looking at me as you did.”

“I saw Donna every time I looked at you,” Aunt Katherine admitted in distress. “To an extent I still do. I thought I couldn’t bear to live with that, but it turned out, I couldn’t bear to live without it. I wanted to come after you, but Hank told me he wasn’t willing to raise someone else’s child, so I stayed away. It was the cause of too much tension though… I couldn’t forgive him for making me choose and we got divorced two years later. That’s when I started trying to track you down but you had already been placed with a couple and your file was confidential.”

Jensen felt irrational guilt at being the reason his Aunt and Uncle split up. “I’m sorry about Hank,” he said stiffly.

“Not as sorry as I am that I listened to him,” she shook her head. “Please, honey, you have to let me make up for the 14 years we’ve lost. Please don’t make me give you up twice.”

Jensen hesitated, the green eyes reminiscent of his mother staring pleadingly at him. “I don’t know if I can do this,” he whispered, his heart clenching. Unconsciously, he reached out for Jared who promptly pulled him snugly into his side. He took comfort from the steady beat of his boyfriend’s
“Why don’t you give me your number Mam?” Jensen heard Jared take over, his voice dispassionately polite. “I don’t appreciate you putting Jensen in a spot like this. He’ll call you to tell you what he decides when he’s had time to think it through.”

Jensen didn’t turn away from Jared or contradict him. On the contrary, he was immensely thankful to his boyfriend for taking over since he obviously couldn’t handle it.

His Aunt Katherine hesitated for a beat before rattling off a series of digits. Jared input the number to his cellphone. And Jensen didn’t look up until he was sure his aunt had left.

“It’s okay, baby, I got you,” Jared held him tightly, speaking in a soothing tone. “It’s alright, baby, shh…”

Jensen was trembling and he forced himself to get a grip. He couldn’t very well get the job done when he was falling apart, ripping at the seams like an amateur.

Jensen drew himself back to his full height, pushing his feelings back behind the curtain. He met Dean’s gaze, and the man looked both saddened and impressed at the set of Jensen’s jaw. He squeezed Jared’s arm once in reassurance, feeling badly for having to shut his boyfriend out as a result. Jared nodded once at him, support, understanding and compassion all in one, and Jensen was sorely mistaken for thinking that he couldn’t love Jared any more.

“Call your friend,” he told Dean in a strangely even voice. “Get me in. I don’t care what he wants in return. I want it done by tonight.”

Dean nodded slowly. “I’ll get it sorted, Jensen.”

###

True to his word, Dean phoned Benny and they arranged for the man to bring Jensen into the bar, proclaiming him under his protection as his nephew. Benny was a stand-up guy, although he seemed rough around the edges at first, and all he asked in return was for Jensen to help him start a club when he went back home. He would co-manage the place until Benny found a full-time guy, and Benny insisted on paying him for it. He needed a paying job in any case, so Jensen readily accepted, and Jared agreed to help him find a location when they went back home.

The only downside to the plan, was that Jared, Matt, Aldis and the others had to wait outside.

They protested immediately, Jared more vehemently than his friends. Even Aldis balked at the thought of Jensen going in alone without backup. The tentative compromise was that they would observe via Dean’s cameras in a van a block away, but even with that, they were all restless.

Except Jensen.

Jensen was just... ready.

His body hummed with adrenaline and he channeled all his confused feelings into tuned anger, electricity sparking through him.

He was JR right now, and JR was fucking lethal.

Jared pulled him to the side before he left. “I love you Jen,” he whispered. “And I love JR too. I love every part of you, so you’re gonna bring all those parts back to me without a single fucking scratch
“Yes, sir,” Jensen winked, finding one last reserve in him to comfort his boyfriend. Jared kissed him hard on the lips and Matt and Aldis hugged him tightly. He shrugged his leather jacket on and checked his pockets once more for his knives.

He was ready.

It was go-time.

###

Chapter End Notes

The action is on! And I couldn't resist bringing Dean and Benny into this! Hope y'all enjoyed!

-JayGirl
Pineapples, graveyards, and...home

Chapter Notes

I worked my ass off, and ta-da!

Unfortunately, this is going to be my last update until next week Sunday, sometime. I have exams all of next week! *sigh* Hopefully, y'all won't hate me for that! ;-) On that note, this chapter is more intense than usual for me. I put Jen through the emotional mill, and I hope you guys can appreciate the way I handled some of the things!
I reference Phil Collins' song You'll Be In My Heart. Nothing belongs to me!

Also, check out my profile! I'm posting a one-shot, one I hope will be enjoyed! Check it out!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

Keeping his head low, Jensen tried to appear as meek as possible; a lamb in wolf’s clothing, instead of the other way around. He kept his eyes on the floor, cringed dramatically every time someone so much as leered at him, and most importantly, he walked in Benny’s shadow, as though being behind the man would offer him safety. Inwardly, he was calm, but he kept up his terrified exterior.

Dean, almost as mother-hen worried as everyone else, had insisted they use comms in addition to observing from the van. It had comforted Jared to know that they’d have verbal communication, so Jensen agreed to it. Surprisingly enough, he felt a modicum of comfort from the little bud in his ear; not for his safety, no, but because he was still hard-pressed to trust anyone else with Jared’s well-being. It got under his skin that he had to trust others to make sure Jared didn’t get hurt, but this way, he could hear if his boyfriend needed him.

And scary enough, Jensen would throw this entire rescue operation down the drain in a heartbeat if Jared so much as hinted to needing him.

“Everything okay there?” he couldn’t help asking, muttering low under his breath and trying not to move his lips too much.

“Of course you would be asking the people safely ensconced in a van away from the trouble whether they were okay,” Jared snorted, and Jensen relaxed marginally. “We’re fine, baby, just worried about you.”

“Do you have to call him that?” Jensen heard Matt grumble. Before Jared could answer, a loud clap sounded, and Jensen suppressed his smirk.

“Thanks, Al,” he muttered.
“Anytime, JR,” Aldis chuckled as Matt grumbled in the background about undeserving Gibbs-smacks.

Refocusing on the task at hand, Jensen scanned his eyes over the bar, quickly spotting the pool sharks Eric had gotten involved in. Eric was on the ground in a fetal position, although he didn’t appear harmed yet. Jensen tried his best to remain docile as the biggest guy circled Eric like a predator.

“You want to play again, old man?” he was sneering, and Jensen’s hackles rose. More than anything, Jensen always hated when people went after other people they knew couldn’t fight back. It was more than cowardly, it was downright disgraceful. Aldis called it his ‘Batman complex’ but more often than not, Jensen used to find himself in the thick of action because he couldn’t overlook what was nothing more than an adult case of schoolyard bullying. Maybe it was a convoluted result of years of abuse, but Jensen couldn’t stand bullies, and his temper could usually be sparked by seeing something like that happen.

And today was no exception.

“Benny, you gotta get Eric out of here as soon as the shit hits the fan,” he quickly told his newfound friend. “Please. These guys aren’t going to just let it go, and he needs to be out of the line of fire. Matt and Aldis, you guys come in once Benny has Eric safely out. I can hold them off till then. Dean, I don’t want you to get involved in an official capacity unless it’s absolutely necessary, and you have a whole company to lose so don’t come in until I give the say-so. Jay…please stay in the van.”

Jensen knew it was pointless even before he said it.

“Not a chance, Jen,” he refused fervently. “I’m not going to leave you alone.”

“You’re more trouble than you’re worth, Padalecki,” Matt sneered, and no matter how close they were, not even Matt was immune to the protectiveness Jensen felt over his boyfriend and mate.

“Shut the fuck up, Matt,” he growled, red flashing over his vision. “I don’t give a shit about history, you don’t fucking talk to him like that again.”

“Jensen,” Matt tried to complain.

“He’s with me, Matt.” Jensen’s voice left no room for debate. “You treat him with the respect he deserves, like everyone else, or you and me are going to have a problem.”

“Calm down, baby,” Jared’s voice washed over him, soothing in the way only he could. Judging from the muted whisper, Jared was trying to keep this between them, for which Jensen was grateful. “I’m okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt apologized gruffly, and Jensen took in a deep breath.

“You okay, kid?” Dean’s steady voice came over the comm, bringing Jensen back to the game. He nodded once, almost imperceptibly, but Dean caught it nonetheless. “We’ll sort out the Brady Bunch over here, you worry about taking down the sons-of-bitches that have your father.”

“Gotcha,” Jensen exhaled shakily, bringing his mind back to the task at hand. The big, burly guy kicked Eric in the stomach a couple times, and that was his way in.

He stumbled towards them, adopting a terrified expression. “L-l-leave him a-alone,” he stammered out, playing up the part with wide, innocent eyes. “Stop h-hurting him!”
Predictably, the man straightened and leered at his trembling form, raking his eyes over Jensen’s deliberately tight clothing. Jensen shuddered again, and this time, he didn’t have to fake it.

“What do we have here?” The big man came forward, forgetting Eric in favor of Jensen. “Name’s Big Mike, sweet thing. Who are you?”

“T…T…Ted,” Jensen stammered, curling in on himself and taking a step back, keeping his eyes on the ground. “Ted Newgent. I’m…m’Benny’s nephew.”

Jensen heard the muted laughter in his earpiece and he tried to suppress his own chuckle. Big Mike helped with that when he stepped forward again, intent clear on his face.

“Well, Teddy-Boy, me and my friends over here, we have a debt to settle with Mister Kripke here,” he announced. “Unless you have twenty grand on your person and you’d like to settle his account for him?”

Jensen cursed inwardly, and heard the profanities filtering through his earpiece.

“He’d never deal on twenty, Jensen,” Matt intoned into his ear, all business now, his mentor just like Jensen remembered him. “You need to get out of there, kid. Sharp-ish.”

“I…I…” Jensen stumbled, buying time as he thought through his options, unwilling to call quits on their plan. These guys were mean, and he had no doubt in his mind that if he left it for one more night, that they would kill Eric. They weren’t like the usual circle Eric dealt in, and unfortunately, that meant that Jensen couldn’t play it the same way he normally would.

“Let him g-go,” Jensen adopted a falsely brave expression and made his hand tremble for effect. He deserved a fucking Grammy for this. “W-w-what if I…I could w-win back h-his m-m-money?”

“What the fuck are you doing, Jensen?” Matt hissed in his ear. “Get the fuck out of there!”

Big Mike clamped his hand over Jensen’s shoulder and the boy jumped at the contact, trying to stay in character and find a way to stop Matt from storming the place. “You wanna try to win back his debt?” he sneered. “What are you offering if you lose, sweetness?”

Jensen took a deep breath. “Myself.”

The reaction was instantaneous. Several voices broke out over his ear, Jared the loudest of them, at the same time that Big Mike and his crew began cat-calling and whistling. Jensen took the opportunity while the gang was making a riot to hiss into his earpiece.

“No one interfere!” he growled. “Y’all have to trust me. I got this.”

“No fucking way,” Matt shouted at the same time that Jared growled, “Not a chance in hell.”

Great, now they chose to fucking agree on something.

“Dean, make sure they stay away,” he ordered, knowing that the older man had promised him earlier to listen to his shots instead of Matt’s and Jared’s. “Matt, send out a Pineapple alert.”

“Pineapple?” Matt shrieked horrified. “Think it’ll get to that? I’m coming in.”

“Listen to me Matt!” Jensen snapped, sensing that the gang was cooling off. “Pineapple to be safe. And stay away.”

“Who you talking to sweet cheeks?” Big Mike taunted. Jensen flinched for good measure.
“Do we have a deal?” he asked, getting tired of having to stammer and play weak in front of the asshole in front of him.

“Let’s play a set of darts, see how you handle yourself, sweetness,” he heckled. “Then we’ll talk about it.”

“Darts?” Jared’s voice went up an octave. “That wasn’t the deal, you were supposed to play pool!”

“Have you ever played darts before?” Matt asked worriedly. “Jensen? Jensen!”

Tired of the continuous break from his concentration, Jensen studiously ignored the voices in his ear, feeling absently empathetic to schizophrenic patients. Instead of entertaining the questions being rapidly fired at him, he trusted Dean to keep his team away and converged his attention to the task at hand.

Keeping the slight tremble in his hands, he threw his darts, getting some score, but eventually being pounded by the larger man. As Jared’s distressed pleas for him to leave filled his ear, Jensen made a mental note to apologize profusely to his boyfriend.

“Well, jailbait,” Mike sneered. “Beat me in a game of Killer and you got yourself a deal.”

Jensen bit his lip, eyes widening. “Please… let’s play pool,” he pleaded, glancing desperately at Eric, then at the pool table. “Give me a chance!”

“Game of Killer,” Mike insisted stonily. “You win, I let Kripke go. I win, I get to pound that sweet little ass like a jackhammer. Take it or leave it.”

Jensen took a shaky breath, hunching over himself. “Fine,” he whispered finally, feeling hurt by the roars of indignation that filled his ear. He straightened and gripped Big Mike’s hand, officially sealing the deal by street standards.

Fucking finally.

Jensen shed his terrified persona, smoothing his face into a cool mask. Grabbing his darts, he smiled a deadly predator’s smile at his newest target. “Why don’t you start?”

Big Mike eyed him suspiciously, but he threw his set, opening with a bull’s eye and hitting a double 12 and a triple 3 to start. Jensen nodded, partly impressed.

“I prefer to knock ‘em out from the top,” he said conversationally. Readjusting his stance, he threw a perfect straight of triple 20’s.

“He hit one-hundred-eighty,” one of the goons’ jaws dropped in his astonishment. “That’s like…”

“Awesome?” Jensen snorted. “I fucking know, right?”

Not needing to hustle this time around, Jensen threw expertly, dominating the game before closing with three cherries. “Grew up in bars, man,” Jensen shrugged innocently, as if to say ‘what can you do?’ while keeping an eye on the growing fury in the man’s expression. “There isn’t a game here that I wouldn’t have run circles around your ass in, if that’s any consolation.”

“You’re a fucking hustler,” he snarled menacingly, and Jensen noted with relief that Benny was helping Eric up and taking him out back.

“And we had a deal,” Jensen answered calmly. “Let it go. I don’t want trouble.”
“Shouldn’t have messed with me then, you little bitch,” Big Mike scowled, advancing on him. Jensen heard the door open behind him, and he knew who it was without looking.

~*Jared*~

Without a doubt, this was the most nerve-wrecking day of Jared’s life. When Jared had seen the man take a step towards his mate, he decided that was all he could take, and he shoved Dean out of the way and ran to the bar like his life depended on it.

Which, in a way, it did.

Jared knew the others had followed him, and he burst into the bar in time to see Big Mike crowd Jensen backwards, evil intent clear on his face.

“Pineapple,” his mate stated in a loud, clear voice.

What?

All at once, the people in various parts of the bar stood, all of them having made their way in unnoticed during the game. As a unit, they came and stood next to Jensen, Matt and the gang joining the crowd wordlessly. Burying his confusion, Jared took his place next to Jensen, glaring menacingly at the man who wanted to hurt his precious mate.

“What the fuck are you?” Mike asked, looking disbelievingly at the people standing with Jensen.

His mate smiled, a feral grin that held none of his normal warmth. “Name’s JR, bitch. Don’t fucking forget it.”

Head held high, he turned around and motioned at the people to leave. They started to, and that was when Jared caught the flash of silver in the corner of his eye.

He flinched, but there was no contact. Jensen held the gleaming blade in one hand, his eyes narrowed in a way that was more menacing than some of the wolves Jared had seen in his life. In the next second, Jensen was across the chasm of space and Big Mike, despite their size difference, was pressed up against the wall with the very same blade he threw at Jared pressing into his throat. His eyes were as terrified as they were incredulous, and his chest heaved with his near-hyperventilating gasps.

Nobody dared to move or even breathe. Jensen was trembling with barely restrained rage, and for the first time, Jared got to see the person Jensen was afraid to be. Contrary to his mate, Jared understood the bloodlust, because he had the same feeling when someone tried to hurt Jensen.

The mating bond.

A pained whimper brought him back to the present, in time to see Jensen press the blade down harder until beads of blood marred the otherwise flawless silver.

“I know you know who I am,” Jensen articulated coldly. “So why the fuck are you testing me?”

“I…I’m sorry, I didn’t think!” It seemed it was Big Mike’s turn to fumble.

“Damn straight you didn’t.”
Jared walked slowly to his infuriated mate, calm and comforting. “It’s okay, baby,” he soothed. “I’m okay. Let him go, and let’s go home.”

The bar was deathly still while Jensen contemplated Jared’s words. “Don’t you find it ironic,” he asked Mike almost conversationally, and fuck, that was scarier than his scary voice, “that you were about to hurt and incapacitate the only person on the face of this entire fucking earth who I’d have listened to about sparing your miserable excuse for a life?” He twisted deliberately and the blade drew another droplet of crimson. “Apologize, and then thank him for saving your life.”

“Thank you, and I’m sorry,” Big Mike spat sullenly. Jensen let go of him slowly, then without looking, flicked his wrist so that he threw the knife clear across the room and dead center on the bull’s eye on the dartboard.

“Don’t even think about him again,” he warned lethally, “or you’ll find out that every story about me has truth to it.”

Jensen was careful to make sure Jared was shielded at every angle, and he rolled his eyes at the protective gesture, making a mental note to tease him later. He conceded to being herded out, knowing that it would give Jensen some semblance of comfort and trusting his mate’s unfathomable reflexes and feared standing among the bar’s patrons.

Once they were safely outside, Jared turned and took his mate into his arms, finally feeling relaxed and relishing in the closeness. It felt as though he’d had a vital part of himself returned, and he nuzzled Jensen’s neck, taking in his scent and trying to find the courage to let him go.

Jensen didn’t seem all too eager to let that happen, much to Jared’s relief. He wound his arms around Jared’s neck, stroking his hair, seemingly convincing himself that Jared was okay. He remembered Jensen’s muted confession about seeing Tyler with a knife trained on him, and he could only imagine what his little mate was feeling now that the target had nearly been met.

“It’s okay, mo chroi,” he breathed, pressing his lips against Jensen’s jugular. Jensen nodded shakily and pulled back, his face drained and drawn with fatigue. “What’s pineapple?” he asked, trying to side-track his mate.

It worked, sort of. Jensen snorted. “Pineapple is a code word for when someone needs backup. When I asked Matt to set it up, I was asking him to send out a warning to the people I’d helped before, anyone who felt like they would have my back in a fight. They could get in unnoticed because they were only there for back-up if I said pineapple.”

Jared’s eyes widened at the sheer amount of people willing to stand behind his mate. Matt, likely reading the expression on his face, added almost smugly. “Half the people I sent the message out to were too far out, but they promised to send word out that JR was considered in their inner circle.”

Jared whistled low under his breath. “Don’t fuck with JR Ackles.”

“Damn straight,” Jensen managed a small smile. “You guys go home,” he instructed. “I have to get Eric to a motel to sleep things off.”

“Jen…” Jared hesitated, not wanting his mate to face the task of sobering his father up alone, like he had to all those years prior. Jensen shook his head with a tight smile.

“I need to do this alone,” he requested, and Jared reluctantly understood. Jensen wasn’t ready to share his family burdens yet, and Jared wasn’t going to push him on it. He saw the emotional toll taxing his mate ever since they entered the town’s borders, and he had been pushed at every turn
since; Jared didn’t want to make things any more difficult.

Besides, he had a visit of his own to make.

###

“Be right there!”

Jared waited patiently as the tumble of locks were heard. Jensen’s aunt’s surprised face came into view, and hope lit her eyes as she craned her neck trying to look over Jared’s shoulder.

“Hello, dearie,” she smiled. “Is Jensen with you?”

Jared was glad of the hope in the woman’s voice. It went a long way to his wondering whether it was wise to let her near his mate. “No,” he shook his head politely. “No, Mam, he isn’t. It’s just me.”

“I can’t help but wonder,” her shoulders slumped sadly, “whether that’s indicative of Jensen’s decision?”

“Jensen hasn’t made a decision yet,” Jared answered truthfully. Katherine nodded thoughtfully.

“Are you here to tell me to stay away from him?” Her voice held no accusation; it was simple curiosity, as though she were asking whether Jared was there selling cookies.

“I don’t make Jensen’s decisions for him,” he stated firmly. “I would never disrespect him like that, or treat him that callously.”

She smiled warmly. “You’ve earned my trust then, young man,” she gestured for him to come inside. “I approve of you for Jensen.”

Jared bristled at the implication that the woman had any right to have a say in his chroi’s life. He declined the offer by crossing his arms and responding coolly; “I didn’t come here to ask for your approval either, Mam. Due respect, you no longer have a say.”

Katherine visibly flinched. “You’re here because you don’t appreciate me trying to become a part of Jensen’s life.”

“Yes, and no,” Jared replied, even though it wasn’t a question. “I think you already know that I am not particularly fond of you. My feelings will not influence Jensen, but I think you need to know that I do not trust you with him.”

“I am his aunt!” she protested, tears forming in her eyes. “I would never hurt him!”

“You hurt him irreparably when you rejected a terrified and lost two-year-old!” Jared shot back, his temper flaring slightly as he thought of the reasons why she had no right to ask anything of his Jensen. “I don’t know why you chose now to become a part of his life, but I just wanted to let you know that you will have a lot more to answer to if you ever hurt him again.”

“It is not my intention to hurt my nephew any more than I already have,” Katherine spoke softly. Jared nodded, taking in a calming breath.

“Then don’t. Jensen is mine. I will not allow him to be hurt by anyone, blood or nay. I just came to tell you that. If he decides to see you, then you need to make up for 16 years and then some.”

“I understand,” she nodded. “I’m glad my nephew has you to protect him.”
Jared inclined his head in acknowledgement. “I’d prefer if you didn’t tell him we spoke,” Jared added.

“I understand,” she repeated.

Jared, in spite of his distrust and dislike for the woman that hurt his mate, politely shook her hand and left. Nothing good could come from disrespecting his mate’s bloodline- and he refused to acknowledge the woman as family yet- and besides, his momma would slap him upside the head if he were anything less than a perfect gentleman.

“Wait till you hear what she did, Momma,” he muttered under his breath. “You might make an exception.”

~*Jensen*~

Jared left with far too little a fight.

If there were anyone in the world Jensen could read, it was Jared, and his boyfriend had agreed far too readily to leave him alone. No. He was planning something. Whatever it was stirred his curiosity, but didn’t alarm him. He trusted Jared with his life and knew instinctively that whatever Jared was doing, he’d tell Jensen eventually, if he needed to know. In any event, right now? Jensen had bigger things to be worried about.

He made his way to the back, spotting Eric easily where he was hunched over in a chair. He reeked of alcohol and blood and sweat, and Jensen grimaced as he approached him.

“Eric?” he called softly, so as not to startle him. He felt a pang in his heart as he realized how long it had been since he’d called the man ‘dad’. “Eric, come on, time to get up.”

Eric stirred, raising his arms weakly to defend his face in his disorientation. Jensen sighed in pity. It was amazing that he could still feel compassion for the very same man that caused the same reaction in him.

“I aint gonna hurt you,” he said gruffly, gripping one of Eric’s arms and hauling him gently to his feet, supporting his leaden weight by throwing the arm over his shoulder. “Just gotta get you to a motel, you can sleep this off and head home tomorrow.”

“Mikey…” Eric mumbled. “Money…”

“It’s sorted,” Jensen said shortly. “Let’s go.”

Eric mumbled incomprehensibly under his breath as Jensen called a cab. It was no easy task to maneuver his drunken foster father into the vehicle, but then, Jensen had years of practice to fall back on. He ignored Eric’s mindless chattering as they drove, just like he ignored the sympathetic looks he was garnering from the cabbie.

“How much?” he asked, when they stopped in front of a motel.

“Your father, kid?” the guy- Jason, the sign in front showed- asked, eyes crinkled in concern.

Jensen nodded quietly by way of an answer. “How much?”
Jensen met the cab driver’s eyes, hoping the gratitude showed in his eyes. He’d never been given much of a break in anything in his life, but a simple act of hospitality and generosity went a long way to reminding him why he never gave up on people and humanity. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure, kid,” Jason smiled warmly. “I had to do the same dance with my old man plenty times before. Someone gave me a break back then too. I hope you find a way to happier times, like I did.”

“I’m very glad you did,” Jensen smiled genuinely. “All the best, man.”

“You too, kid. To you too.”

Jensen carefully steered his father into the motel, paid for a room for three nights, just in case, and set Eric on the bed.

“Jensen!” Eric suddenly sat up, and a thrum of fear settled into Jensen’s chest. “I have a son,” Eric mumbled. “His name is Jensen.”

With a start, he realized that Eric didn’t recognize him. He nodded, entertaining Eric. “That’s great. Lie down and sleep it off. I’m leaving Advil and water on the bedside.”

“I hurt Jensen,” Eric whimpered. Jensen stopped in his tracks, unable to do anything more than listen to the words spilling from Eric’s mouth, unfiltered and unrestrained. “I hurt my son, because every time I see him, I remember that I failed to protect him from my weakness.”

Jensen could hardly take a breath in. “W-what weakness?” he forced the words out from numb lips.

“I can’t protect him from me,” Eric sighed mournfully. “I’m nothing without her, I can’t live this life without her. Jensen is good. He’s a good boy. He takes care of me like she used to. I wish he would leave me to die, I wish he didn’t waste his goodness on me. Jensen…my boy…”

Hot tears cascaded down his cheeks and he wiped impatiently at them. After all these years, and all these bruises, now? Why the fuck now? “Why haven’t you ever apologized to him, then?” he demanded, infuriated with himself and with Eric.

“Because he would forgive me,” Eric said simply, turning around and burying his face in the pillow. “My little boy would forgive me, because he has her heart. It never mattered that he wasn’t…ours, because he was…ours. We made him ours. She would hate me so much…why doesn’t Jensen hate me? Why won’t he leave me alone?”

“I…” Jensen hesitated. “Jensen would never want you to get hurt. He still remembers the father you used to be.”

“I don’t want to hurt my boy anymore,” Eric slurred, eyes closing.

“Then don’t,” Jensen whispered, breath hitching.
“L’ve you…J’nsn,” Eric garbled before dropping off with a light snore.

Jensen covered him with a blanket, locked up and slid the key underneath the door. And then was the only time that he allowed himself to properly break down.

He leaned back against the hard wooden door, sliding down slowly until his ass touched the concrete. Curling his arms around himself, he buried his face in between his knees and openly sobbed for all that he’d lost, and all that he might have had if Eric was a little stronger, or a little more open with him. He sobbed for Jody, the woman who taught him how to love with his whole heart, the woman who was his mother for all intents and purposes. Eric had been right about one thing; she had made him hers. She had made him their son with the love she’d had for him. Even when he wasn’t theirs in the technical sense of the term, she expounded all the love in her heart and made him theirs in the ways that counted.

Stumbling blindly, he broke into a clumsy run, not needing to see through his bleary eyes to know exactly where he was going. He barely felt the 5-mile run, a testament to the running he tried to do regularly to burn off his stress and worry.

He knew the graveyard like the back of his hand; could have found Jody’s headstone blindfolded and with his hands tied behind his back. Dropping to his knees at the cold, concrete slab, he let his frame-wracking sobs take over.

“I’m sorry, Mom, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry,” he mumbled over and over, pain constricting his chest until he thought he couldn’t breathe. Deep in the recesses of his mind, a soft voice came over his memories, like a radio finally being tuned to the correct frequency.

Come on, stop your crying, it will be alright…
Just take my hand. Hold it tight.
I will protect you from all around me.
I will be here, don’t you cry!

“Mom.” Jensen sighed, listening as the song replayed itself in his mind, Jody’s soft, sweet voice, light and lilting with love and laughter seeping through the pain, reaching the part of him, the 8-year-old Jensen, that he thought died with her in that car crash.

For one so small, you seem so strong.
My arms will hold you; keep you safe and warm.
I will protect from deep inside me.
I will be here, don’t you cry.

Coz’ you’ll be in my heart.
No matter what they say.
From this day on, now and forever more.
I’ll be there, always…

…Always.

“Just look over your shoulder,” Jensen whispered the last lyric that he remembered. The one she would sing while she tapped his nose with her finger and smiled like she’d won the lottery. “I’ll be there, always.”

He nodded shakily, remembering what he’d buried all those years ago. What he’d forgotten to remember. That she would always be there with him, if he were just so inclined to look. And it had taken Eric getting drunk and remembering who he used to be, for Jensen to remember just who he
used to be as well.

It was an indication of how long he’d been there when the sky began to lighten. There was still no sun, but the dawn of Sunday morning was beginning to creep in. He let out a raggedy breath, caressing one hand over the cold tombstone.

“I miss you, Mom. Happy birthday.”

~*Jared*~

His heart hurt like a thousand elephants were stampeding over it at the sound of his mate’s mournful sobs. When Jensen had failed to return last night, one hour, two hours, four hours late, Jared had wanted to scour the town in search of his missing mate. Aldis had been the one to realize the date, and directed Jared to the local cemetery. He didn’t stick around to hear Aldis convincing Matt to let him go alone; just assumed it had worked when he got there and no one had followed him. Relying on his sense of smell, and the cries he could hear from his mate, it hadn’t been long before Jared found him.

He was hunched over her gravesite, heart-wrenching sobs ripping from his chest in a way that made Jared suspect that Jensen had never really given himself time to grieve. He heard Jensen’s mumbled apologies, his confession of how much he missed her, heard the tune Jensen had been absently humming under his breath. It had taken every iota of willpower not to go to his mate and cuddle his close, kiss him, caress him, do anything to take the pain away. But who was he to deny Jensen this time? More than anything, the stunning, green-eyed love of his life needed to take time out to wash away all the pain he’d been carrying in his heart since his foster mother had passed away, and while it hurt Jared, and went against his instincts to allow Jensen to be alone, he’d had to do it.

When the sky started to lighten and Jensen murmured a heartfelt wish, Jared couldn’t stand being away any longer. Walking towards his mate, he held out a hand cautiously.

Jensen looked up, red-rimmed eyes wide and just as gorgeous as ever. Smiling weakly, he took the proffered arm and Jared hauled him up, cuddling him immediately against his chest. Jensen put up no struggle, merely collapsing against him, emotionally spent. He stood there quietly soothing, one hand gripping Jensen’s waist while the other caressed his hair and the nape of his neck.

Eventually it was Jensen who broke the silence. “She would have loved you.”

Jared smiled, looking down at where Jensen’s head was tucked underneath his chin. “Yeah?”

Jensen nodded, peaking up from underneath long lashes. “Yeah.” He cleared his throat, his voice still thick from the crying. “You would have liked her, too. She was really funny. And clever. And she had the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever known.”

“Yeah?” Jared nuzzled the edge of Jensen’s jaw. “She sounds like someone else I know.”

Jensen hummed nostalgically. “She taught me how to love, and said that was what made me her son. Not blood, or DNA, or genetics. Just love.”

Jared waited a beat. “You’re right,” he conceded, cradling Jensen’s face and thumbing away the tears. “I would have liked her, too.”
Jensen wound his arms around his neck quietly, burying his face in the crook between Jared’s neck and shoulder. Jared gently maneuvered them so that he could lean down and hook an arm underneath Jensen’s knees. Today, his mate didn’t protest as Jared cuddled him to his chest, but actually huddled further into the embrace as Jared lovingly carried him to his waiting truck. As Jared set him on the seat, he saw Jensen take a deep breath in, running an absent-minded hand over the seats as he took comfort from the familiar feel and smell surrounding him.

Jared quickly crossed to the driver’s side and pulled Jensen flush against his side as he drove, unwilling to let his mate go another second with a loving, caring touch. Before they could reach Aldis’ house, Jensen was asleep, one hand resting over Jared’s heart, where he’d allowed the steady thumpthump to lull him to sleep. Smiling beatifically, Jared ghosted his lips over Jensen’s forehead.

“Dream sweet, baby.”

~*Jensen*~

It was eight-thirty when Jensen woke. Jared was spooning him and he was dressed in Jared’s old t-shirt with his boxer shorts, his earlier get-up folded neatly and set atop his duffel bag. He reasoned that his boyfriend must have carried him in and changed him, and Jensen had slept through it all. He had been more exhausted than he’d initially thought.

He slipped stealthily out of bed, grabbing his jeans and slipping them over his bare legs, leaving Jared’s t-shirt on. He stole out of the room, following the smell of coffee to the kitchen, when an abnormally somber Aldis was sitting at the table.

His friend was looking out of the window, absently sipping out his mug as his mind raced with whatever thoughts were occupying it.

“What’s up, buttercup?” Jensen asked teasingly. Aldis jumped half a foot in the air at the sound of his voice, and Jensen chuckled under his breath.

“Fucking Christ on a unicycle, JR,” Aldis hissed, holding his chest with one hand and setting his coffee cup in the sink with the other, mopping at the coffee stains on his shirt where it had sloshed over. “Make some noise, would ya?”

“Sorry, Al,” Jensen snorted, pouring some of the steaming hot liquid into a cup for himself. “What’s on your mind?”

“How are you feeling, kid?” Aldis asked, avoiding the question. A seed of trepidation spiraled in his chest as Jensen narrowed his eyes at his long-time friend.

“I’m peachy,” he replied snarkily. “Tell me what’s going on in that big head of yours, man.”

Aldis sighed heavily, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “You don’t have to worry about it, JR. It isn’t your issue.”

“If it involves you guys, it is,” Jensen insisted softly. “You guys had my back yesterday, and for all the years I was here.”

Aldis nodded slowly, biting his lip worriedly. “There’s something you should know, JR,” he said
softly. “About Matt.”

Jensen settled himself into the chair opposite his friend’s. “Tell me.”

“JR, man,” he seemed to be struggling for words. “Matt...he took it really hard when you left. Was happy for you, but it damn near killed him.”

Jensen flinched, sorrow squeezing his heart. “I never wanted to hurt him,” Jensen whispered, feeling sick to his stomach. Aldis made a frustrated sound under his breath.

“Fuck, kid, I know,” he pressed his palm to his forehead. “I’m saying this all wrong, I never meant to make you feel bad.”

“I know, Al,” Jensen comforted, trying to push away his feelings. “Just talk. I won’t break, I’m not fragile.”

Aldis nodded again. “Just...he likes to pretend he aint hurting, but it killed him before, and it’s gonna kill him now.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t like seeing him hurt, man. I’ve known Matt since we were kids. He’s too...” Aldis struggled for the words.

“He loves me too much to tell me not to come back,” Jensen supplied, his heart sinking. Aldis’ eyes widened, and he hastened to clarify. “He loves me like a little brother, right? He doesn’t want to hurt me by telling me that I hurt him every time I come, and then leave again.”

Aldis’ eyes shuttered abruptly and Jensen felt oddly like he was missing a vital piece of the puzzle. Regardless, the older man nodded. “Yeah, JR. Got it in one.”

Jensen looked into the coffee mug, studying the swirls of black like there was going to be a test on it later. On the one hand, a deep sense of loss hit him for the friends and brothers he just now realized he had in his old gang.

But on the other hand, he’d do anything not to hurt Matt.

“Jared and I will leave before noon,” he decided softly. Aldis began to protest, but Jensen waved him down with a melancholic smile. “I know, Al,” he reassured his friend. “But I can’t hurt him any more than I already have.”

Aldis crossed around the table and gathered him in a tight hug. “I’m sorry, JR,” he apologized wretchedly.

“Don’t be, Al,” Jensen thumped his friend’s back twice. “We’re family. Always will be.”

~*Jared*~

Jensen’s decision to leave was abrupt, but not totally unexpected. He’d gotten up early enough to hear the tail-end of his mate’s discussion with Aldis, and although he appreciated that the man didn’t correct Jensen’s misconception that Matt loved him like a brother, he was also loathe for the additional sorrow on his chroi’s face.

Jared snuggled his mate close to his body and let Jensen silently cry at what he was leaving behind.

Before they could leave, Matt came sprinting to the car, out of breath and apparently having run all
the way. To both their surprise, he asked to speak to Jared alone.

“Since the day he told me I have no skill in pool, I’ve loved him. I...I love him,” were the words out of his mouth. Jared struggled to contain his instinctive jealous rage.

“I know.”

Matt nodded slowly. “Make him happy,” he requested lowly. “Love him more than anything. See to it that he laughs more, and doesn’t ever cry for too long. Treat him as you would a God, because that’s more or less what he is.” He raised his chin a fraction in defiance. “And I swear to you, if you ever hurt him, I’ll kill you myself, or die trying.”

Jealous or not, Jared owed Matt a slight due. He shook the man’s hand, showing his begrudging respect with an acknowledging nod of his head. “Thank you for taking care of him when I couldn’t.”

Matt didn’t respond, and Jared didn’t expect him to. Instead, he went to Jensen, who was watching him with tears glistening sharply in his emerald green eyes.

Jensen hugged him tightly, and Jared didn’t stop him, because from the look in his mate’s eyes, it was a goodbye. Sorrow touched Jared’s chest through their mating bond, and he tried to send out feelings of warmth to his better half.

“Goodbye, Matty,” Jensen spoke roughly.

If Matt saw it for the final goodbye that it was, he didn’t say a word.

~*Chris*~

Chris flicked irritably at an invisible fleck on his kitchen counter. The entire weekend had been a nightmare, starting with the scare of Jensen running off on Friday and culminating in him sitting at the counter on Sunday afternoon, having gotten no sleep the entire weekend, because he was worried sick about his little brother.

He knew that Jensen was with Jared, and he knew that in reality, there was no safer place in the world for his best friend, but that did nothing to ease the anxiety that had been thrumming through his veins since that goofy kid from Jensen’s art class had come asking him whether Jensen was okay or not. He longed to see his best friend with his own eyes, see for himself that the stubborn ass was unharmed.

Well, like they say; ask, and thou shalt receive.

The deep rumble of Jared’s truck was unmistakable, and Chris jogged out to meet it. Righteous indignation radiated off him, and he worked up a head of steam to let off at Jensen the minute his hard-headed best friend stepped off the truck and into his line of sight.

The first thing Chris saw on Jensen’s face was the bone-deep weariness.

His shoulders were slumped and his eyes, red-rimmed, and it seemed like every step took him more energy that he had to spare. His smile was feeble and the first word that popped into Chris’ mind was the one word he never thought he’d ever associate with his little brother.
Acting instinctively, he drained the entire force of his fury with a sigh. Jogging to Jensen’s side, he hugged him tightly, briefly, then wound an arm around his waist and easily carried the weight when his best friend slumped into him.

Walking him slowly into the house, Chris murmured soothingly under his breath. “Come on, I gotcha little brother. I gotcha. You're okay. You're home now.”

Jensen turned his head fleetingly into Chris’ shoulder, and protectiveness flared deep inside him. He set his best friend down on the couch and sat on the coffee table in front of him. Jensen drew his legs up and tucked them underneath his chin, looking small and world-weary. Even then, he worked up a smile, and Chris had to admire the strength of the boy in front of him.

Jared came over and kissed Jensen slowly, gently. Chris busied himself getting Jensen a glass of Coke, not wanting to intrude on the intimate moment.

“I'll see you later, baby, okay?” he heard as Jared murmured softly. “Just call me if you need me, mo chroí.”

“I love you.”

“More than the moon and the stars.”

“Forever and always.”

Chris walked in just as Jared kissed Jensen one more time. The Alpha nodded at him, and Chris heard the unspoken order to look after his mate. He snorted derisively inwardly. He didn’t need an order to take care of his family.

Handing Jensen the drink, he made himself comfortable on the opposite end of the couch. “You gonna tell me what happened before or after I kick your ass for scaring the hell out of me?” he asked teasingly.

Jensen chuckled lightly, and the sound was like a soothing balm to a burn. “Before,” he opted. “It’s a long story, so maybe you might forget.”

Chris smiled, relieved to have Jensen back and calmer than he’d been in three days.

“Go on, tell me.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Please don't hate me for the way I handled Eric! XD Don't worry, he will still pay his due, and Jared will still get his pound of flesh, but I figured Jensen deserved one moment of reprieve, don't you?

Also, pool, and darts...as you can see, I'm a girl of bar games myself! Product of older brothers! On that note, for anyone who didn't know, a cherry is another term for a bull's eye. ;-) Like I said, intense. But I hope you guys enjoyed! Waiting with bated breath! And am I
the only one glad to have Chris back????
Thanks for reading, and be sure to check out my other little piece! Much love! <3

-JayGirl
Thank you all for the good wishes, the patience, and all the love! <3 Once again, I am so incredibly honored that y'all are enjoying my work so much, and I hope you all continue to! Thank you, thank you, thank you.

What you've been waiting for: Meeting the Padaleckis!

Enjoy!

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~*Jensen*~

Taking a small sip of his Coke, Jensen tried to figure out where to start his story. His mind was fuddled with exhaustion and weariness. Jared had wanted to take him straight home to sleep, but in truth, Jensen had missed Chris and needed to talk to his best friend a little while in an effort to gain some perspective. Jared hadn’t argued, and though he’d seemed curious, he hadn’t asked, for which Jensen was tremendously grateful. He wasn’t sure himself why home seemed like Chris’ place more than his own.

He knew he’d made the right decision, though, when he’d gotten here. Chris had seemed ready to rip him a new one, but one look at him, and his best friend knew intuitively that it wasn’t the right time. Instead, he’d just helped Jensen in, and God, Jensen hadn’t even realized that he was so sapped out of energy. It had been liberating to let go; here, he could trust that Jared was safe, and effectively, he could let his guard down, let Jared and Chris take over the load. He’d forgotten how strenuous it was, how hard it was on him, to be JR, and even more so now that he’d had Jared to look out for.

Chris was right; now, he was home. And sure, a whole new set of problems awaited them here, but he could deal. He had a home worth fighting for.

A family worth fighting for.

He looked at Chris, still sitting patiently across from him. The long haired boy was calm, seeming content to wait until Jensen had his head straight.

“It’s good to be home,” Jensen mumbled unthinkingly. Chris grinned, stretching his leg out halfheartedly to tap Jensen’s shin.

“Good to have you home,” he replied, in a rare display of affection.

Jensen sighed cavernously. He had a long story to tell, and Chris would wait all night to hear it. “My foster father…he’s kind of an addict…”

###

“I left him in a motel to sleep it off, and Jared and I came home,” Jensen concluded. Even though
he’d left gaps in his story- Eric’s confession and his abuse, Jody’s graveside, his chat with Aldis-Jensen still found himself ever more drained, having had to relive the weekend in stark detail. Chris had nearly come off the couch when he recounted going head-to-head with Big Mike, and had simply chuckled to himself when Jensen relayed Matt’s nighttime visit. Now, his friend was silent, sharp blue eyes assessing him so astutely, that Jensen felt worried he was inadvertently giving things away.

“How the fuck are you still standing, Freckles?”

The softly spoken question served to drain all the tension from his body like a sponge soaking up water. He let his head fall back on to the couch, the sympathy in his best friend’s eyes too much for his frayed emotions to deal with. “I don’t fucking know, man,” he confessed in a rough whisper. “I’ll let you know when I can catch my breath.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about your dad, Jensen?” Chris asked quietly. Try as he might, Kane couldn’t totally hide the hurt that was radiating off his posture, and if using his full name wasn’t enough of an indication, Jensen could read his stormy eyes like a book, anyway.

He sighed, pulling his long-sleeved shirt over his palms and gripping the material in a nervous gesture. He half-shrugged, careful not to meet Chris’ eyes. “I guess I didn’t want you to judge him based on the mistakes he’s made,” Jensen repeated what he told Jared, except after Eric’s little confession, he felt like he maybe meant it a little more. “You don’t know the man I used to know when I was a kid. What he is now…it’s a product of circumstance.”

“It’s also a consequence of decision, Freckles,” Chris objected gently. “He’s a grown ass man. You understand that he needs to take responsibility like one, don’t you?”

Jensen scowled. “Don’t treat me like a kid with a victim complex,” he snapped, knowing that Chris was least deserving of his tone. The long-haired boy took it in stride, fixing him with a gentle, yet shrewd look.

“You are a victim, Freckles, whether you want to admit it or not,” he maintained softly, while still being firm. “But that’s not the point here. The point is that…” Chris half-sighed, half-chuckled. “I’m not really sure I have a point anymore. I just hate that I wasn’t there.”

Jensen felt remorse settle into his belly. “I’m sorry, Chris,” he aimed heartfelt green eyes at his best friend. “I never meant to leave you out, I just didn’t want you to get hurt on my behalf.”

Chris wrinkled his nose. “Put the puppy-dog eyes away,” he complained with a small smile. “I forgave you already.”

Jensen felt a smile crack over his face, the first he’d smiled in a while. “You’re too easy, Kane,” he teased, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

“Whatever,” Chris griped, pink coloring his cheeks. “And for the record, getting hurt on your behalf? Not your choice. Mine. And next time, you’re calling me.”

“Okay,” Jensen nodded solemnly. “I will.”

“Good.”

Jensen took out his phone, ignoring his friend’s confused look in favor of dialing. “Hello,” Jensen spoke politely, sounding very formal. “Is this Mrs. Padalecki?”

Chris’ eyes widened. “What the hell?” he whispered softly, bemused.
“Speaking,” the woman responded, slight confusion coloring her tone.

“This is Jensen, Mam,” the green-eyed boy continued, in a charismatically respectful voice. “I’m so sorry to be so rude as to do this over the phone, but I apologize for not making it to brunch today. I don’t know if Jared told you, but I had a slight family crisis.”

Chris grinned mockingly at him and Jensen flipped him off, making the other boy chuckle.

“Jensen!” Mrs Padalecki exclaimed happily. “So good to finally hear from you, sweetie! I understand completely, Jared mentioned what happened when he came home. Thank you for calling me, though, honey, that’s very well-mannered of you.”

Jensen flushed. “My momma raised me polite, Mam,” he grinned into the phone. “Thank you so much for inviting me. I look forward to meeting you some time, Mam.”

“Why not tonight?” the woman suggested, sounding excited. “Come and have dinner with us!”

“Ah…” Jensen flinched, cursing inwardly, even as his voice took on its most charming tenor. “I’d love that, Mam.”

“Excellent! We’ll see you at 5, hon, I’ll tell Jared to fetch you.” The woman’s tone broached no argument, and Jensen agreed weakly.

“What was that about?” Chris asked as Jensen flipped his phone shut and shoved it in his back pocket.

“I’m going for dinner to the Padaleckis.” Jensen swallowed, rubbing his hand over his face. Chris fell about laughing, clutching at his stomach and ignoring the glares Jensen was aiming at him.

“How’d you manage to get roped into that?” he cackled, wiping away a tear from his eyes.

“My momma raised me polite,” he repeated, his voice surly. “I couldn’t say no.” Sighing, Jensen tried to look into his last reserves to find the strength to get through another emotionally grueling event.

Chris noticed the weariness and promptly sobered. “You’ll be able to handle it, Freckles?” he asked worriedly. “You’re taking on your family and your old life, and the Padaleckis, all in one weekend?”

“What the hell choice do I have?” Jensen sighed. “I know Jared really wanted me to meet his parents, and he’s done so much for me this weekend. I’d do anything for him.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t expect you to do it all now,” Chris spoke reasonably. “He knows what you’ve been through these past few days.”

Jensen shook his head. “Just because he doesn’t expect something from me, doesn’t mean I shouldn’t give it to him.”

Chris blew out a breath through his teeth and nodded slowly. “I guess I hear you…but do you really think you’ll be up to it?”

“I have to be, so I will be.”

###

Jensen ran his hand through his hair for the umpteenth and third time. His dirty blond spikes looked none the worse for wear at his brutal treatment, and it was something in itself to be thankful for,
considering how much Jensen had been musing it.

He bounced his leg up and down in impatience, trying to calm his frayed nerves. He wondered again, what had possessed him to accept the invitation, and glared at the sky from underneath his long lashes when he remembered. “Hope you’re happy, Mom,” he muttered, “you and your manners are what got me into this mess in the first place.”

Jensen could have sworn he heard the echo of Jody’s laughter in the breeze that caressed his exposed arms.

He took a minute to marvel at the ease with which he’d spoken. After visiting Jody for the first time in years, and actually talking to her for the first time since the accident, Jensen found it slightly easier to think about her. He felt her in every move he made, in a way he hadn’t allowed himself to since he’d lost her. He was far from healed, he knew, but he no longer shied away from her either. It was almost…liberating.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Jensen jumped slightly as big, warm hands wove around his waist and Jared propped his chin on Jensen’s shoulder. His boyfriend kissed the sensitive spot behind his ear and he melted against him, feeling protected as he was cushioned against Jared’s muscular chest. Jensen rested his head lightly against Jared’s downturned mop of hair as his boyfriend playfully nibbled at the juncture between his neck and shoulder.

“What a way to get snuck up on,” he commented absently, relishing in the electricity elicited from his boyfriend’s touch. Jared chuckled against him, the vibrations adding a delicious new sensation.

“It’s good to know I can sneak up on you,” he commented. “It means you’re Jen again, and not JR, which in turn means that I can go back to being the protector.”

“You couldn’t handle two days being the protected one, huh?” Jensen smiled in amusement.

“I’m an Alpha, baby.” Jensen didn’t need to look down to know Jared was sporting a pout. “Not in my nature to let my mate protect me.” He sighed dramatically. “I don’t think I could do it again, Jen.”

“Hopefully you won’t have to,” Jensen pressed his lips against Jared’s hair. “But you should know that I won’t stop trying to protect you if it’s in my power.”

Jared straightened and turned him around in his arms, before leaning down to nuzzle his throat. “I know, sweetheart. But you’re doing that thing where you avoid the original question again. What were you thinking about so hard that I managed to sneak up on you?”

Sighing, Jensen began to play with the hair at the bottom of Jared’s neck, finding a way to phrase his worries. “I was thinking about Jody…and I was worrying about meeting your family.”

Jared licked the underside of his jaw, making Jensen giggle slightly. “Whenever you want to visit your mom, tell me okay? I’ll drive you.”

“Thanks, Jay.” Jensen kissed the hollow at his boyfriend’s throat. Jared nodded.

“As for my family,” he continued, “I’m so sorry about my mom. She’s just been so excited to meet you…but you just say the word, sweetheart, and I’ll tell them to hold off until you’re ready. You’ve had such an emotional weekend…I don’t want you to feel overwhelmed or obligated here, Jen.” Jared fixed him with a serious look, love and concern radiating in his hazel eyes. “They won’t mind if you want to postpone, and you know that you’re the only one I’m worried about here.”
Jensen nodded slowly. “I know, Jay…but I need to do this. I wish I could explain why…I just feel like its something I need to prove to myself I can handle. Does that make any sense?”

“It does,” Jared tilted his head to the side. “But I don’t understand why you need to prove anything. You’re the strongest, bravest, kindest, most amazing person I’ve ever met.”

Tears stung Jensen’s eyes and he swiped impatiently at them, huffing out a laugh. “I think you’re biased.”

“Naw,” Jared grinned, nuzzling him again. “I think I see you more clearly than them all.”

“You do,” Jensen readily agreed. “Let’s just hope your family thinks the same things you do.”

“They’re gonna love you, baby,” Jared assured him with a smile as he led Jensen to his truck. “Mom’s been flitting around the house like a headless chicken since you called, muttering about what a nice boy you were and how she needed to get things perfect. When I told her to calm down, she slapped me upside the head and told me to come get you. And Megan began getting ready about two hours ago.”

Jensen huffed a laugh. “Will your brother be there?”

“No,” Jared shook his head and made his way quickly around the car. Opening the door, he hopped in as he explained. “Jeff is back home with his wife and their pups. He said he’d meet you when he came next. It’s just gonna be us, my parents, and Megan.”

“Is it a bad thing that I’m relieved about that?” Jensen asked guiltily as Jared pulled away from the driveway.

“It’s no worse than me wishing Megan wasn’t gonna be there,” Jared grinned ruefully. “Just take all the childhood stories with a pinch of salt.”

Jensen chuckled. “Well, at least there’s that to look forward to.”

By the time they pulled up in front of the house, Jensen was sure that Jared could hear the rapid thumping of his heartbeat. Anxiety and anticipation churned in a twisting concoction in his belly, and Jared reached over to pull Jensen’s body into his, peppering kisses over his clammy face.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” he told Jensen, punctuating each word with a kiss. “I’m right here. I love you. We’re doing this together.” He pulled back to meet sincere hazel eyes. “It’s me and you against the world, baby,” Jared murmured, heartfelt.

Gradually, the tension left the smaller boy’s shoulders, and a small smile graced his features. “Me and you, Jay.”

###

~*Jared*~

In his peripheral vision, Jared noticed his mother waiting impatiently at the door, but he decided that his mate came first at that moment. He was wrecked with nerves and he needed him, and that surpassed everything else. Pulling Jensen into his arms, he rubbed soothingly at his back and nuzzled the nape of his neck until the boy relaxed against him.
“Are you sure you’re up for this?” he asked uncertainly. Since his mother had told him she’d invited Jensen for dinner, it had been worrying him that Jensen was taking on an entire army in a weekend.

“I have you there,” Jensen answered softly, but surely. “I can handle anything.”

Jared responded the only way he knew how; fusing their lips together in a kiss that would hopefully convey his love and devotion. Cradling Jensen’s face in his hands, he gently nipped at his mate’s bottom lip, and soothed over it with his tongue, seeking entrance. Jensen’s lips parted for him with a faint sigh, and Jared licked into his mouth, using his tongue to trace every crevice in the cavern of his mate’s mouth. He sucked gently on Jensen’s tongue, eliciting a sharp gasp, and growled when Jensen’s hands flew up to tangle into his locks.

Before he could lose his senses and forget that his mother was standing right there, Jared pulled away, but not before butting his nose lovingly against his mate’s jaw.

“I love you, sweetheart,” he reminded Jensen in a low voice, “but right now, I can’t take my time as much as I’d like to. My mom is dying to meet you, and if I keep you here much longer, she might actually beat me around the head with her wooden spoon.”

Jensen huffed out a begrudging laugh, straightening and steeling himself. “Let’s go,” he flicked his head weakly at the entrance of the house.

Jared vowed to stay close until his mate relaxed some.

He went around the car and wrapped his arm around Jensen’s waist as they were walking. His mate tensed for a second, before melting into the hold and reaching around his stomach to grip Jared’s fingers. The Alpha could practically feel his mother fawning at the display.

“Jen, this is my mom, Sherry Padalecki. Mom,” he grinned, looking between his beautiful Beta-Mother and the love of his life. “I’d like you to meet Jensen, my mate.”

Jensen blushed ever so lightly, but pushed back his shoulders and stood tall, aiming a devastating smile at the woman in front of him. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you, Mam,” he held out his hand, his low-pitched voice even charming Jared. “Thank you for having me over.”

Sherry Padalecki was practically bursting with excitement and she disregarded the hand offered to her in favor of pulling the boy in front of her into a warm hug. “Thank you for coming, honey!” she gushed. Pulling away from the smaller boy, she reached up to smack her son upside the head. “Jared Tristan Padalecki, why did you wait this long to bring him over?”

“Momma,” Jared complained, rubbing at the sore spot as Jensen snorted quietly. “I had to get to know my mate before you guys got to know him.”

All that earned him was another slap. “Don’t talk back to your momma, Jared Tristan,” Sherry scolded him again, and this time Jensen laughed outright. Jared complained under his breath, but in truth, it was worth it to hear Jensen’s laugh. He could feel his mom’s love for his mate radiating off her, and he loved her all the more for her open-armed welcome.

Jensen was relaxing next to him, and Jared marveled at the influence of a mother’s touch. He definitely needed to thank his mom profusely for being exactly who she was, and all at once, the nerves he hadnt even known he’d had, disappeared.

What could possibly go wrong?

Famous last words.
Sherry led them into the house, talking to Jensen non-stop. “I swear, Jensen, I feel as though I know you already! You’re all Jared talks about these days.” Jensen grinned at the knowledge, another knot of tension melting away.

“Mom!” Jared intercepted again, cheeks flushing. “There are a thousand other things we could be talking about right now. Where’s Meg?”

“She’s upstairs,” Sherry answered, waving her hand in the direction of the staircase before narrowing her eyes and looking speculatively at Jensen. The green-eyed boy squirmed slightly at the scrutiny, but remembering the lessons he’d learnt over the years, he forced himself not to cower away.

“Jensen, honey, you’re too skinny,” she decided finally, and Jensen was so ridiculously relieved that she hadn’t found something not to like, that he huffed out a small laugh. “Jared you need to feed your mate,” she scolded lightly, winking at him.

Before his boyfriend could defend himself, they were sidetracked by movement coming from the stairs. A young girl, who looked to be around her early teens, was bounding towards them, a bright grin on her face. It was easy to see the resemblance between Jared and the smaller girl, but when her light brown eyes sparkled with the force of her smile, there was no doubt left in the world.

She stopped in front of them, smiling shyly at Jensen and half hiding behind her brother. Jensen’s heart warmed, and he forgot his own nervousness in an attempt to soothe hers; he’d always had a big soft spot for kids.

“You must be Megan,” he smiled at her, before his boyfriend could introduce them. At the beginnings of her questioning look, he answered before she could ask. “You have the same smile as Jared, just cuter.” He winked at his boyfriend in silent apology, but despite his words, the grin stretching over Jared’s face was enough to take his breath away and then some.

Megan giggled, face coloring slightly as she reached out a hand. “It’s awesome to meet you,” she said shyly, shaking his hand and coming to stand next to Jared. “You’re way out of my brother’s league,” she blurted without thinking, blushing even more furiously when Jensen laughed.

“No, I think that’s the other way around,” he admitted, smiling at her amicably. Jared was beaming, despite the obvious barb towards him, and as he wound a hand around his sister’s shoulders, it was obvious that they were pretty close.

“I’ll tell you a secret, Meg,” he stage-whispered. “Jensen hasn’t figured out that you’re right yet, so let’s trap him here before he does.”

It was Jensen’s turn to flush scarlet as Megan giggled again. “You’re such a weirdo,” she told her brother affectionately. “Come and help me with my Chem homework before dinner?” she looked beseechingly up at Jared. “It’s just the one problem I can’t figure out.”

“Aw, I suck at Chem, Megs, you know that,” Jared whined. “Phone Jeff, he should be able to…”

“Why don’t I help?” Jensen offered. “I love Chemistry.”

“Oh, no, honey,” Sherry protested. “We couldn’t ask you to do that!”
“Mom’s right, you’re a guest,” Megan shook her head bashfully. “I’ll just call my other brother…”

“Nonsense,” Jensen waved away her remonstrations. “It’d be a pleasure to help.”

“Jensen’s a Chem genius,” Jared chimed in proudly. “If anyone could help, it’d be him.”

“I wouldn’t say genius,” Jensen mumbled with a pleased smile. “But I would really love to help. Why don’t you show me your work?”

Sherry placed her hand in between his shoulder blades, smiling dubiously at him. “Are you sure it’s no bother, honey?”

“One hundred percent, Mam,” he nodded reassuringly, smiling brightly at her. Chemistry was something he could work with, something definitive, and certain. If anything else, it would help his own nerves, since this entire situation was so out of his control.

Megan’s face lit up with a grin, and she led Jared and Jensen back up the stairs to her room. “It’s stupid Avagadro,” she complained, forgetting her initial nervousness in favor of her annoyance towards the work. “I get the molar concept, but the last question wants me to calculate the empirical and the molecular formula of a compound…and that’s when I get lost. What’s the difference anyway?”

Jensen gathered his thoughts, trying to find a way to break it down for her. “Think of it in terms of a tiered cake,” he suggested thoughtfully. “Let’s say it was a chocolate, vanilla and red velvet layered cake. And say that the person who baked the cake, baked 9 layers, alternating each flavor.”

He paused, and after ascertaining that the kid was still with him, he continued. “So, if someone asks you what the cake was like, what would you say?”

Megan frowned. “I would say that it was a chocolate, vanilla and red velvet cake.”

“I would say that it was tasty,” Jared grinned, and Jensen huffed a laugh, unable to glare at the interruption. Megan, sharing no such amusement, stuck her tongue out at her brother and threw a pencil at him.

“That’s great, Megan,” Jensen praised, while Jared mumbled under his breath about abusive little sisters. “It’s what I would say too. But why wouldn’t either of us say that it was a 9-layered cake, with 3 layers of chocolate, 3 layers of vanilla and 3 layers of red velvet?”

“It’s easier to just say that there were three flavors, it simplifies the answer,” Megan shrugged. Jensen beamed at her use of words.

“Excellent,” he praised again, grinning. “I like that you used the word ‘simplify’, because that’s your answer right there. The empirical formula of a compound, is the simplified version of the answer, while the molecular formula, is it’s true formula. So let’s say you were given a molecular formula of C6-H12. What would your empirical formula be?”

Megan’s face dawned with understanding and she grinned brightly. “C-H2?” she asked excitedly.

“Got it in one, kid,” Jensen grinned, holding his hand up for a high-five. Megan giggled and slapped her palm against his. “So, now that you know the difference, it should be easy enough to show you the different formulas for calculating them, since the formula almost comes from the definition itself…”

###
In about half an hour, Jensen had made certain that Megan could understand, and answer any questions he threw her way, and she was positively on a high from finally understanding the complex work. She bounded down the stairs, eager to tell her mother about it.

“Hey.” Jared snared his arms around Jensen’s waist once more, pulling him against his broad chest. Jensen sighed happily, going willingly. “Thank you.”

“Mm…what for?” he asked distractedly, as Jared started pressing little kisses across his neck and collar bone.

“For teaching my sister,” he answered, his breath hot against Jensen’s sensitive skin. “For being so nice about it. For being so good with her.”

“She’s your sister, Jay,” Jensen nudged his boyfriend’s temple with his nose, the gesture unconsciously picked up from all the times Jared did it to him. “And she’s a great kid. I’m glad I could help.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?” Jared asked, pressing teasing little kisses on each corner of Jensen’s mouth, and then on the tip of his nose. Before he could press in closer and steal a kiss, Jared tensed around him.

Jensen leaned back, peering up into Jared’s diverted eyes. “What?”

“My dad’s here,” he answered, pulling back with a small smile. “Come on, you should meet him. We’ll continue this,” he gestured between them, eyes darkening almost imperceptibly, “a little later.”

Jensen shivered at the promises he saw in those slanted hazel orbs. “I’ll hold you to that.”

They made their way downstairs…and that was when the shit hit the fan.

Jared’s father stood in the middle of the living room, looking formidable. Though he aimed a smile at them, it seemed forced, and Jensen was hit with a tingling in the arch of his foot; something that had always happened to him whenever he sensed trouble. He felt his shoulders tense the longer the man looked at them, and if it were a cartoon, he’d be whipping wooden boards from the air and building a wall around himself where they stood.

“Jensen, this is my dad, Gerald Padalecki. Dad, this is my mate, Jensen,” Jared introduced them with a blinding grin, seeming unaware of the tension in both Jensen, and his father.

Hearing Jared introduce him as his mate always sent a bolt of pleasure shooting down Jensen’s spine, and while tonight was no exception, it paled in comparison to the anxiety when he saw the narrow, veiled look of displeasure tightening Gerald Padalecki’s eyes. It was a look that he could easily catch, no matter how subtle, because years on the streets had honed him to look out for it.

It wasn’t a look he’d ever encountered outside of the JR part of himself. Not even with Jake.

He swallowed hard, and found himself channelling the old parts of himself as he held out a hand to shake. He catalogued the man’s movements, trying to determine whether he meant any harm. “Nice to meet you sir,” he nodded politely, sharp green eyes analyzing the older alpha critically.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Jensen,” Gerald rumbled, taking his hand and squeezing it just this side of too tight. Jensen steeled himself and refused to look, or pull away.

Gerald flicked his head towards the kitchen. “Why don’t you go see if your mother is finished with dinner, son?” he suggested smoothly. “I’d like to get to know your mate a little better.”
If Jared noticed the way his father sneered the word ‘mate’, he didn’t react to it. He smiled brightly at Jensen, still blissfully unaware of Jensen’s hesitation. It was so unusual, since Jared was usually hyper-alert of his emotions, but with all the stress of the weekend, maybe the Alpha had dismissed the emotions as Jensen’s own nerves. He swooped down to press a small kiss to Jensen’s temple before leaving, and Gerald’s lips tightened into a thin line as he led the way to his study, expecting Jensen to fall into step behind him.

Though he put up a cool front, Jensen was uneasy about the whole deal. Something about the other Alpha seemed…well, not threatening, per se, but not welcoming either.

Gerald settled himself in a big leather recliner, gesturing for Jensen to take a seat opposite him. Much as he wanted to be defiant and opt to stand, he also didn’t want to brush Jared’s father up the wrong way…even though it seemed that somehow, without even trying, he inadvertently had. Jensen took a deep breath and sat stiffly in the other chair.

“So, you go to the same school as my son does, Jensen?” Gerald asked, still maintaining his cold detachment. Jensen bristled, the irritation overriding his anxiety for a brief moment.

“Due respect, Sir,” he nodded coolly, “you called me aside for a reason. I see no reason to beat around the bush when you have a clear goal to achieve from all this.”

Something like impression flashed through the older man’s eyes, before it was once more blank.

“You’re a human mate, Jensen, or so my son seems to think.”

“You think he’s wrong.”

“I do,” Gerald nodded, even though Jensen wasn’t really asking as much as he was observing. “I think Jared is confusing hormonal teenage lust for a mate-ship, because he has been looking for his mate his entire life. My wife is my mate,” he continued, “so I understand the sanctity of the bond. I would hate for my son to miss out on that because he made a juvenile mistake.”

As much as Jensen felt like he was going to end up on the receiving end of a bad blow, he couldn’t hold back the anger that flooded him as the Alpha insulted his Jared. “You talk about him like he’s some kind of child,” he glared at the man, talking through clenched teeth. “Don’t, sir. Your son is one of the most level-headed guys I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, so don’t insult him by even insinuating that he’s anything near the region of juvenile.”

Once more, the man looked to be impressed for a fleeting moment, before his mask came back down. He nodded thoughtfully.

“Very well. Then let me be frank,” he leaned forward. “As a human mate, if you even are that much, you are weak. Our pack is in a position right now where we cannot afford any chinks in our armor, and a pack Alpha with a vulnerable mate is the epitome of that. I know Jared thinks he loves you, but you don’t belong here, and you don’t belong with my son.”

Jensen absorbed each word like a blow to the gut. He felt nauseous, and even though he wanted to deny it, he couldn’t help wondering whether he was making Jared weaker. He knew Jared, and he knew their bond; he had no doubt that if mates existed, they were each other’s. But the man in front of him was a pack Alpha, someone who knew the inner workings of his pack better than Jensen could ever hope to, and if he said that Jensen would be a ‘chink in their armor’, then what was there to gain by ignoring him, or disputing it?

Gerald continued, uncaring of Jensen’s turmoil. “You’re not suited to be part of this life, and if you love Jared, you won’t continue to drag him down with you. As it stands, you’ve already nearly
caused a pack war with your very presence in his life, but you’ve also begun impacting the peace treaty we’ve been negotiating that’s been standing for decades! You’ve a menace to the very lifestyle we lead, and I cannot allow you to destroy my heir, and my son.”

Jensen felt all the blood drain from his face, and his breathing became choppy. What if…if he was right?

His nightmare played on loop in his mind:

*Jared falling.*

*Blood staining the floor around him.*

*Face pale.*

*Eric shouting.*

“You kill everyone you love! You’re nothing but a curse!”

Jensen jolted back to reality as those words impressed themselves in his brain, mixing with Gerald Padalecki’s words.

“…I’ll pay you,” the man was still speaking. “Name your price to stay away from my son, I know you need the money.”

Drudging up the very last vestiges of his reserves, Jensen stood up, numb and broken in a way he hadn’t been in a long time. The image of his boyfriend- his mate- in his mind, he found the strength to do this one last thing.

“You don’t need to do anything, Sir.” He spoke hollowly, pushing the words past frozen lips. “I’d fight for Jared with every bone in my body, but I would never put him in danger. If I would keep him safe by walking away, then so be it.”

The older alpha was rooted in place, shock splashed across his features. Jensen ignored it, and flipped open his phone, pressing speed dial.

“Freckles?”

“Chris, I…” his throat closed up, and he struggled to get the words out. It felt like every one of them were little knives, ripping through his throat. “I need…can you come get me please?”

“I’ll be there in two minutes, little brother,” Chris answered immediately, sounding grim. In the background, he could hear the rattle of keys, and the slamming of a door. “Just hang on, I’m coming, okay?”


He swallowed down his shattered emotions, needing to at least attempt to leave without tipping Jared off. Ignoring the still shell-shocked man in front of him, he left quietly, back still straight, head held high. He followed the sounds of joyful laughter, easily picking out Jared’s sunny chuckle, even as it was like a dagger to the heart.

He pasted on a smile that felt more fake than a seven-dollar bill, and woodenly addressed Mrs. Padalecki.

“I’m so sorry, Mam, but something has come up and I don’t think I can stay for dinner. I’m so sorry
for the inconvenience.”

“Oh, no!” Sherry frowned, concern swamping her face. “Is everything okay?” She looked dubious, and more than a little upset, and Jensen wondered whether there was any point in trying to excuse himself and seem normal while doing it.

But it was the look of alarm on Jared’s face, the sheer panic he saw there, that told him that he hadn’t succeeded in his intent.

Jared was in front of him in an instant, disregarding the presence of his family as he cupped Jensen’s face in his big palms. “What’s wrong, baby, what happened?” he murmured urgently. “Tell me, please…”

“I’m okay,” Jensen protested in a choked off voice, trying valiantly to maintain his emotionless mask. He pulled away from Jared’s grasp, and the look of hurt in his mate’s face was almost too much to take.

But he had to protect Jared.

“I need to…I have to leave now,” he whispered, his chest constricting painfully.

“Let me take you home, Jen,” Jared tried again. “We can talk on the way, baby…”

“Chris is coming to get me,” Jensen cut him off, and right on time, headlights lit up through the windows. “I’m so sorry, Jay. Goodbye.” He pressed a kiss to the hands he was still holding before he ran.

He didn’t look back.

###

~*Jared*~

Jared used to think that he’d experienced the worst of panic and fear. The look in his mate’s eyes? The way he ran away? The way he said goodbye?

Never before, not once, had Jared ever experienced that level of terror.

Because this problem? It couldn’t be fixed by shielding his mate with his body, or wolfin out and ripping someone’s throat out. Whatever had just happened, the despair, the fear, the sheer pain, the brokenness he felt over their mating bond…it wasn’t something physically inflicted. And Jared needed to fix it, he needed to get his Jensen back into his arms, where he belonged, but fuck, how do you fix something if you didn’t know how it broke?

The answer was in front of him, and nothing could have stood in his way once he saw the flash of guilt in his father’s eyes.

“What did you DO?!” he growled viciously, body trembling violently as he fought the shift. His inner Alpha-Were was beyond recognizing his father, consumed with the instinct to take out the threat to his precious mate, before tracking him down. He got up into his father’s personal space, barely cognizant of the yelps and fearful reprimands of his sister and mother. “What did you do to him, what did you say?!”
His father growled warningly at him, but he wasn’t in a position to stand down. His instincts preceded all rational thought at this point, and all that mattered was the truth. He was just barely keeping himself from doing anything he might one day regret.

“Jared, please,” his mother was saying, but his father cut her off.

“I merely pointed out to the human that he was too weak to stand by you, Jared,” he said impassively. “He accepted the truth that he would kill you if he remained at your side, and he agreed to leave.”

Both his mother and his sister gasped at the revelation, but Jared was too dazed to react for a few seconds.

Jensen had run off trying to protect him.

Protect him, by staying away from him.

If Jensen thought Jared’s safety was at risk, then he wouldn’t do the job half-assed, either.

He heard his mate’s voice in his mind: You should know that I won’t stop trying to protect you if it’s in my power.

He would leave. Disappear, so Jared could never find him.

He was going to lose Jensen.

“I’m so sorry, Jay. Goodbye.”

“NO!” he roared, doubling over in agony. He needed to get to Jensen.

He needed to get to Jensen.

He needed to get to Jensen.

The thought consumed him, and he sprinted upstairs, ignoring it as his mother started yelling at his father. He grabbed the duffel of clothes he hadn’t bothered to unpack, glad now, for his laziness, and flew back down the stairs, grabbing his keys off the hallway table.

Wrenching the door open, he ran to his truck, but before he could open his door, his father was there.

“No!” he growled ferociously. “I have nothing to say to you! I swear to God, if I lose him because of you…you’re going to lose your second heir, too, and this one won’t be coming around to visit.”

“You are behaving like a child!” Gerald thundered. “This is why he couldn’t possibly be your mate, you’re too…”

“Jensen is my mate!” Jared snapped icily. “I don’t care what you think, I’m not a child, and I know Jensen is mine just as well as I know who I am. Now get out of my way, before I make you.”

His father’s eyes widened, and Jared took advantage of his momentary shock to throw his duffel into the truck and hop in. He threw the car into gear and peeled out of the driveway, the action becoming far too familiar to him.

The road to Jensen’s place passed by in a blur, but it still didn’t feel like fast enough when he finally
reached the face-brick house. He stumbled out of the car and threw open Jensen’s front door desperately, only to be met with a wall of Chris, and subsequently shoved against the wall.

“How the hell could you let this happen?” the long-haired alpha growled. “If Jensen was really…”

And it was just the start of that sentence that was the last straw for Jared.

He flipped them around easily, the strength of the pack Alpha outweighing everything, and shoved Chris none-too-gently face-first into the wall. “Don’t you dare!” he snarled. “If one more fucking person even insinuates that Jensen is not my mate, there will be blood.”

“I was going to say that if Jensen was really smart, he’d let me kick your ass for not being there for him,” Chris grumbled, sounding a little less homicidal and a little more controlled.

“Jared!”

Jensen’s voice was really the only thing that could cut through the red haze in front of him at that moment. Jared looked up to the top of the stairs to see his mate’s disheveled features, eyes bloodshot and puffy from crying, voice raw and uneven, cheeks flushed from scrubbing at them.

He’d never looked more beautiful.

He let Chris go and took the stairs two at a time to get to Jensen. He threw his arms around his mate and pulled him unforgivingly tight into his body, taking a huge, shuddering breath as he did.

God, he could finally breathe again.

###

~*Jensen*~

It was like he could finally breathe again.

Which was ironic, considering that Jared was crushing him so tightly, he couldn’t really breathe very well, but it sure as hell was better than the devastated, shattered feeling that he’d had leaving the Padalecki’s house half an hour earlier.

Jared’s gasping, muted tears brought him back to his body, and he gestured to Chris to leave. His best friend nodded once, and Jensen sank down to sit on the top step, taking Jared with him. His own tears ran rampantly down his cheeks, and he rocked them both back and forth in an attempt to comfort.

“I’m here, Jay, I’ve got you…I’ve got you.”

“Don’t you do that to me again, don’t you leave me,” Jared demanded roughly, pulling back and boring his eyes intensely into Jensen’s. “I don’t care what everyone else says,” he overrode Jensen before he could try to refute Jared’s plea.

“You can’t say that, Jay,” Jensen spoke gently, even as the thoughts made his heart break. “You’re Pack Alpha. You have so many wolves depending on you. I can’t be the reason that they end up dead…or worse, that you end up dead.”

“You don’t get it, baby,” Jared shook his head. “You. Are. My. Mate. Nothing in the world means as much to me as you do. I would give up the pack, my title, my family, for you. I would give it all
up in a heartbeat if it was a choice between them and you. My father was stupid enough to underestimate my mating bond with you, or he wouldn’t have pulled a stunt like he did today, because he knows as well as I do that once a wolf finds his mate, there’s nothing he wouldn’t do to keep them. You’re my family, now, Jen,” he said steadily, bringing tears to Jensen’s eyes. “There’s nothing in the world I would choose over you. Without you, I’d be better off dead.”

There was little else he could do besides crawling into Jared’s lap and kissing him for all that he was worth.

Jared kissed him back with equal fervor, hands quickly finding their way underneath his shirt and into his jeans as Jared cupped his ass and ran his fingers over his taut back. Jensen keened, rocking downwards into Jared’s quickly-hardening crotch. Jared growled, and the sound made the hair at the back of his neck stand on end. Without warning, Jared stood, taking Jensen with him, and walked to his room, not once taking his lips off Jensen’s.

Instead of throwing him on to the bed like he normally did, Jared went with him this time, almost like he couldn’t stand to be separated from him for that short time.

Covering Jensen with his big body, Jared began trailing kisses down his neck, sucking at his pulse point unforgivingly until Jensen was sure there would be a vivid mark there. With the flick of his wrist, Jared ripped open his shirt, and at that point, Jensen was too turned on to care. His boyfriend teased him relentlessly, suckling at his tender nipples and laving over the hard nubs with his tongue, leaving biting hickies all over his torso, before finally swiping his tongue half a centimeter below the waistband of Jensen’s tented jeans.

Jensen almost came off the bed, mewling desperately as Jared ripped his jeans and his boxer shorts off in one fluid motion. He looked at his boyfriend and mate from underneath desire-lidded eyes, noting that somewhere along the line, Jared had lost his shirt and jeans too.

Jared kissed him again, but there was less of an edge this time. It was soft, sweet, and it calmed his raging desire for a moment, before turning it into a raging inferno once more.

Jared looked at him, hazel eyes blown almost black with want.

“I want you, Jen,” he growled roughly. “I need you, baby, I need to have you. Can I? Please?”

There was really only one answer to that.

“Fuck yes.”

###

Chapter End Notes

*Evil laughter* I couldn't resist one more tease! But yes, the next chapter will be the much anticipated smut!

I sincerely apologize for the lack of wolf cuddling; I know I promised it to many readers, but this chapter got super long, so instead, it will all be in the next chapter! Cross my heart!

Hope y'all enjoyed! <3
JayGirl
Finally! I'm so sorry for the long wait! It was my birthday last Thursday :-) So between that, prepping for finals, and writing the most difficult chapter yet, I was late!

It took a crap-load of rewrites, and finally, I'm deciding to just go for it. This is my first time writing slash, and my second time writing smut, so bear with me if it's awful!

To all my terrific readers, I love you all so much. You truly humble me, and I hope I didn't disappoint with this chapter! Special shout to j2_is_life, a reader that started this journey with me when I had 3 comments and about 7 kudos. I miss you hon! Hope you're well!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

“Fuck yes.”

Jared growled at the ready submission. His mate was utterly beautiful, spread out under him, naked and writhing, panting and flushed with desire, green eyes blown black with unadulterated lust, even as they managed to shine with a love paralleled only by the light of a thousand suns.

Jared must have saved a God in his past life to have deserved the angelic piece of perfection that was his Jensen.

His cock strained against his boxers, but he ignored it as best he could, not wanting to ruin the sanctity of the moment by taking Jensen hard and rough. There would be time for that later. Right now? Jared had come closer to losing his love than any other time, and not by anyone else’s hand, but by a weapon more powerful than that; words. His father had manipulated his mate in the only way he could, and Jared was not blind to the miracle that Jensen hadn’t left before he got to him. Now was the time to treasure, to cherish, to revel. Now was the time…to take his time.

He lowered his weight on to his forearms, which were bracketing Jensen’s flushed body, lining their bodies up without pressing too hard on to his sweet, little mate. Jensen moaned, a broken sound at the back of his throat that made Jared’s head spin and his cock twitch demandingly. Leaning down, he caught cherry, plump lips into a long and sensual kiss that spoke of passion and desire and love and devotion. He explored the hot, wet cavern of Jensen’s mouth, swallowing his mumbled pleas and groans.

Finally, when breathing became a problem, Jared sat up and straddled Jensen’s legs, being sure to line their cocks up. He ground down slowly, and there was something distinctly sensational about feeling his mate’s hot length dragging over the material of his boxers and seeping into his own flesh. Jensen seemed to agree, if the drawn-out moan was anything to go by.
Smirking, Jared leaned down and without preamble, took one dusky pink nipple into his mouth. He sucked and nibbled relentlessly while his fingers tweaked and twisted Jensen’s other nipple, humming around the hard nub when Jensen whimpered at the sensations and wound his hands in Jared’s hair. After a few minutes of enjoying the salty-sweet tang that was pure Jensen, Jared switched over, laving the other nub with the same attention, getting it to a hard peak before flicking his tongue teasingly over it and straightening, grinding down on to Jensen with the same motion.

“Tease,” Jensen half-whimpered, half-groaned. “Fucking touch me already, Jay, please…”

“I’m gonna touch, Jen,” Jared promised in a dark voice, roughened with lust. “I’m gonna touch,” he punctuated the words with a flick to each of Jensen’s sensitive nipples, “I’m gonna play,” he leaned down to lick Jensen’s pulse point, “and I’m gonna claim.” He wrapped a large hand around Jensen’s hot dick, pumping twice and holding his mate’s hips down with the other hand as Jensen bucked wildly with a muted yell. “I’m gonna claim you, baby, because you’re mine,” Jared growled. “Gonna mark you up and make you mine, show everyone that you’re mine.”

“Only yours,” Jensen garbled nonsensically, head thrown back and back arching into Jared’s talented hands. “Only ever yours, Jay.”

“Yes.” Jared hissed, swooping back down to latch on to Jensen’s exposed throat, sucking hard and unforgivingly until blood flooded to the surface. His mark. His claim.

“Need you, Jay,” Jensen moaned. “Need you inside me. Fucking now, Jay.”

“I got you, baby,” Jared assured his beautiful mate. “Gonna fuck you into the matress, Jen, gonna fill you up so good…you want that, baby?”

“God, Jay, yes,” Jensen keened, strong fingers reaching up to grip Jared’s shoulders, holding him in place as Jensen surged his hips upwards, brushing their groins together. Jared threw his head back and groaned at the sensations, hastily pulling off his own boxers too; he needed to feel skin-on-skin.

Jensen opened up eagerly for him, and he hummed in satisfaction as he slotted himself between his mate’s legs. They both groaned loudly at the first touch of their hot lengths, Jensen’s breath coming out in sharp bursts over Jared’s face. He leaned down to kiss possessively at Jensen’s throat, desire roaring through his body and leaving him flushed and yearning.

He drifted his head down and latched on to Jensen’s left nipple once more, distracting Jensen as he moved his long fingers down past Jensen’s heavy balls to travel the length of his ass. He probed teasingly at Jensen’s tight opening, humming around the nipple he was suckling when Jensen arched his back in pleasure.

He circled Jensen’s rim slowly, wanting to push in and feel his mate’s most intimate entrance, but not willing to hurt his precious Jensen either. He pulled away, grinning wolfishly at the whimper of protest this was met with.

“Don’t want to hurt you, baby boy.” Jared rumbled, rocking his hips into Jensen as he spoke and reveling in the breathy gasp that tore from his boyfriend’s throat. “Need to…”

“Bedside drawer,” Jensen gasped out. Jared reached over and growled low in his chest when he pulled out the lube that was already a quarter the way through.

“Who, Jen?” he demanded, jealousy roaring through him, painting his vision with crimson.

Jensen rolled his eyes, not seeming the least bit intimidated by Jared’s outburst. “No one,” he drawled lowly. “You’ll be my first. I used the lube by myself.”
“Fuck!” Jared growled at the pictures this presented in his mind; Jensen’s head thrown back in ecstasy, body arched as he pushed his fingers into himself…”Did you think of me when you did it?” Jared demanded, gripping Jensen’s cock and stripping it quickly, making Jensen buck off the bed. “Do you imagine it was my fingers in your tight little hole? Did you want it to be my cock? Did you scream my name when you came?”

“Yes!” Jensen hissed, gripping Jared’s shoulders hard enough to bruise, but damn if that didn’t just turn him on even more. “I wanted you, Jay, just like that. I want you inside me, I want to feel you. No glove; I trust you.”

“Jesus, fuck, baby,” Jared growled again, stroking Jensen’s cock once more before pulling away to coat a finger with lube. He rubbed the slickened digit teasingly over Jen’s twitching hole, grinning when his mate hissed slightly at the cold gel. Slowly, he pushed the finger in, moving inch by inch until he was in knuckle-deep. Jensen’s was keening above him, and Jared leaned down to nip and bite and suck at the tender flesh of Jensen’s inner thighs, in an attempt to take his mind off the stretch. “Easy, baby,” he soothed roughly. “Easy, Jen. I gotcha…just relax baby, just let me in…”

Jensen’s choppy breathing didn’t abate, but he did as Jared asked, relaxing around the finger inside him and moaning deliciously when Jared began to drag his finger in and out. He leaned back only for a second, to coat two fingers with lube now, and as he slid both fingers in, the passage was a lot smoother as Jensen forced himself to relax against the stretch. Jared ducked down and tongued insistently at the juncture between his fingers, even nibbling at Jensen’s stretched rim for a little bit while Jensen babbled incoherently at the onslaught of sensation. As much as Jared could happily continue to rim his pretty mate for hours on end, his cock had other ideas.

Scissoring his fingers, he began to work his beautiful, writhing boyfriend open, whispering a continuous litany of praises; streams of ‘so good for me’ and ‘fucking gorgeous’ and ‘that’s it, baby boy, take me’. It seemed every word only fuelled his mate’s urgency, and Jared leaned down as he wriggled three fingers in, to whisper against Jensen’s ear.

“So fucking good for me, baby,” he growled low, making sure his lips brushed against the sensitive skin of Jensen’s ear. “So fucking responsive. You’re all mine, aren’t you baby boy? You’re my pretty little mate, my pretty baby.”

“Fucking…Jay…” Jensen cried, his voice wrecked as he screwed his eyes shut, trying to rock into Jared’s pumping fingers. “Fuck me already, Jay, I need to feel you.”

“I gotcha, Jen,” he soothed once more, curling his fingers experimentally, trying to find the bundle of nerves that would get his mate seeing stars.

Jensen bucked with a choked off cry and Jared grinned in triumph as he found it. Rubbing his fingers insistently over his sweet spot, Jared whispered filthily into Jensen’s ear. “Feel that, baby? Like that?”

Jensen was too far gone to answer, shoving himself desperately down on to Jared’s fingers. He keened and surged forward to bite down on the tendons in Jared’s shoulder, and that combined with the sight of his stunning mate so utterly debauched was Jared final undoing.

“Can’t hold off, baby, need to be inside you,” he rumbled.

“Come on, Jay,” Jensen whined. “Come on, fuck me, fill me up, Jay. Please.”

So came the begging, and so went the final shred of Jared’s control.
If Jensen would have known that begging would have gotten him to where he wanted to be faster, he would have been fucking pleading the minute Jared ripped off his clothes.

His boyfriend growled, lifting him with his hands under his thighs until his cock was pressed up against Jensen’s entrance.

Fuck, but Jared was fucking huge.

Jensen thought he ought to feel a little apprehensive at the thought that the first cock in his ass was going to be as fucking proportional as the man pushing it in, but instead, all he felt was hunger and desire and raging lust. He knew Jared would never hurt him, and he trusted that.

Rocking his hips back an inch, he stared up at Jared’s beautiful face. His normally sparkling eyes were black with desire, even as stubborn, leftover tears clung to his lashes. Jensen’s heart hurt at the sight, and he reached up to cradle Jared’s face with his palm, thumbing away the offending moisture. Jared’s whole face softened, and from the burning urgency now emerged a more fervent, but quieter desire to mate.

Slowly, Jared pushed forward, whispering words of love and comfort as Jensen unconsciously tensed at the burning intrusion. “Come on, baby,” Jared almost cooed, “I got ya…trust me…there you go, you’re so fucking good for me, baby boy.”

Focusing on Jared’s whiskey drawl, Jensen made himself relax, and it wasn’t until Jared tenderly kissed both his eyelids that he realized he’d closed his eyes.

“Open up, baby boy, let me see those beautiful green eyes.”

Jensen took a deep breath and did as Jared asked, tears building and throat twisting at the look of sheer, unadulterated love on his boyfriend’s face. Jared shushed him, pressing loving kisses over his throat and face as he did. “Don’t cry, baby, I love you so much…I won’t move until you’re ready, Jen, I promise.”

Jensen took in a shuddering breath, infernal desire blazing hot from deep within him as he adjusted to the feel of Jared inside him. He rocked experimentally, and the burning and stretching sensation gradually dulled in the face of the mind-numbing pleasure.

Jared groaned deeply above him. “Look so fucking good on my cock, baby, you fit so perfectly around me. Fucking made for me, Jen…take me so good…”

“Move, Jay,” Jensen gasped out, feeling like he would go mad with desire if Jared didn’t fuck him right the fuck now. “Fuck me.”

Jared pulled out slowly, before pushing all the way back in, gradually building up a faster pace as he moved, Jensen moaning and writhing underneath him. “So big,” Jensen keened, at the same time that Jared moaned,

“So tight.”

Jared was more or less pounding him into the mattress by now, any facsimile of restraint lost in their
passion. A breathy, punched out "Ah, ah, ah," fell from Jensen’s lips as he hung on to Jared, letting his boyfriend take him, claim him. Jared shifted to the right suddenly, and slammed back in, hitting his prostate dead-on, making Jensen scream in pleasure.

“More, Jay,” he begged. “Please, Jay, harder, please, faster, Jay…”

“Mine!” Jared growled roughly, continuing to jackhammer into him even as he leaned down and caught the side of Jensen’s throat in a punishing bite, not enough to draw blood, just enough to mark.

Jared reached between them with his hands, one big, hot, rough palm beginning to jack his cock in time with Jared’s thrusts. The dual sensation of Jared’s hand on him, and his cock slamming into his prostate, and Jensen was sure he wasn’t going to last long.

“Jay, I need…” he pleaded, not even sure anymore what he was asking for. “I need, please…I…”

Apparently, Jared knew.

“That’s it baby boy,” Jared growled, “that’s it, let go…come on…let go, baby, come…come for me.”

Damn if he could refuse that command.

With a muted scream, Jensen threw back his head and came hard. White sparked across his vision as his cock pulsed, shooting thick ropes of come between their sweaty bodies. Jared stroked him through his orgasm and continued to fuck him, muttering lowly; “So good, baby boy, you moan so pretty for me…fuck, Jen, so fucking hot, so pretty…”

Jensen lifted his ass slightly, mustering up the energy to try to get Jared there. Something began to catch on his sensitive rim, making him whimper slightly.

“Shh, baby, just my knot,” Jared soothed, in time with his pounding. “Gonna knot you up so good, baby boy, gonna be tied together for hours filling you all the way up with my come.”

“Fuck!” Jensen swore as his spent cock twitched with renewed interest at the idea. How the fuck did that turn him on?

Jared reached for his over-sensitive cock again, stripping it relentlessly. “Ngh,” Jensen whimpered, even as his cock began, impossibly, to harden once more. “Fuck, Jared…”

“Come on, baby, you can do it,” Jared murmured, slowing for one torturous moment to roll his hips teasingly, brushing over every inch of him and pushing the massive knot further into him. “Let me get you there.”

When Jared’s impossibly huge knot finally sank into him, Jensen let out a strangled moan, as it kept rubbing at the perfect angle against his prostate. He was on the edge, he knew, and he wanted Jared to get there with him.

Looking at his boyfriend from underneath lowered lashes, Jensen reached a hand between them and pressed his finger against his tautly stretched rim, so that each of Jared’s thrusts scraped his finger against Jared’s knot. Dropping his voice an octave, he murmured, “I want you to come inside me, Jay…Alpha.”

As he suspected, calling Jared that had his boyfriend done for.

With a broken growl, Jared surged down and sucked the skin just below Jensen’s pec into his mouth,
to muffle his scream as he came hard, painting his insides with hot, sticky come. Jensen’s release pulsed through him at the feel of Jared’s knot locking them together, and his mouth opened in a silent ‘o’ of ecstasy.

Jared collapsed on top of him, still keeping most of his weight on his forearms as he caught his breath. Jensen hung on to him for dear life, calming his own frantically beating heart as he pressed his palms over Jared’s chest, just above his heart.

The rapid thumping underneath his palms was as perfect as the feel of Jared pulsing into him.

“We’re…”

“…Mated,” Jared whispered reverentially, catching his lips in a tender kiss. “Finally,” he spoke against Jensen’s lips. “Finally, you’re mine in every way, mo chroi, and I’m yours.”

Jensen shuddered, rocking his hips with a pleased groan. “I…like the sound of that,” he finally responded, breathlessly. Jared nodded, pressing chaste kisses all over the vivid marks he’d sucked into Jensen’s throat.

“Me too, baby,” he murmured. Jared placed his hand over Jensen’s heart, mirroring the green-eyed boy’s own position. “Even our hearts’ beats have synced up, Jen.”

Jensen nodded shakily, a single tear snaking down his cheek as their world became suspended in that moment of utter perfection.

His boyfriend shifted them around so he was spooning Jensen, bodies still locked together by Jared’s knot. He nestled into the familiar comfort of strong arms, feeling fatigue catching up on him.

“Sleep, baby,” he heard Jared murmur against his ear. “We can talk in the morning.”

Jensen slept.

###

*Something was burning.*

That was the first coherent thought that filtered through Jensen’s foggy mind as he stirred to consciousness. He sat up, wincing at the dull throb in his ass, and noting the glaring absence of his boyfriend. Every inch of his body was achy in the best way, but Jensen decided that basking in the feelings would have to come underneath whatever was burning, on his list of priorities. Grabbing his sweats from the floor, he yanked them on, clenching his teeth against his body’s vehement protests, and ran down the stairs. Skidding to a stop at the kitchen, Jensen took in the sight of his shirtless boyfriend, in the middle of the room, looking slack-jawed at the charring mess on the stove and in the toaster, seeming frozen and unable to decide which problem to react to first.

If the pan wasn’t about to erupt into bright, orange flames, Jensen might have taken a moment to laugh.

Instead, he grabbed a dish cloth and quickly snatched up the burning frying pan, wrinkling his nose at the blackened mass that seemed to be eggs that was clinging to the cast iron. Quickly, he opened the back door and deposited the pan on the porch, before darting back and flipping the switch on the toaster that forced it to short circuit. Gingerly, he fished out the unidentifiable lumps of used-to-be-bread and dumped them with the ruined eggs before throwing open all the windows and both the doors to try and get rid of the smoke.
Jared was still in the same position, and Jensen worried about smoke inhalation. It was barely a light cloud of smoke, but did the smoke effect Jared more severely because of his heightened senses?

Gently, he pulled his boyfriend’s arm and sat him down on the couch in the living room, away from the destruction zone. He leant down between Jared’s legs and cupped his face, gently slapping.

“Jay?” he called in a soothing, low voice. “You okay?” His boyfriend blinked and Jensen sighed in relief.

Jared’s mouth twisted into a pout. “I was trying to make you breakfast.”

And his voice was so small, and his pout, so childlike, that Jensen just had to dissolve into laughter.

Jared didn’t see it that way. “Don’t laugh at me!” he groused, huffing. “I was trying to be a good boyfriend.”

“I’m…sor…sorry,” Jensen gasped out between giggles, taking Jared’s hands in his own to stop him from stomping off. “I’m sorry, Jay,” he said finally, getting his laughter under control. He grinned fondly at the boy in front of him, lifting a hand to instinctively push Jared’s hair back away from his eyes. “You’re just so adorable.”

Jared considered this for a moment, but apparently, the apology was enough, because a rueful smile to the place of his frown. “You made it look easier than it actually was.”

Jensen smother his laughter. “I’ve been doing the kitchen and cooking thing since I was 9, Jay,” he reminded him softly, smiling. “You should be more careful. What if the smoke had hurt you, or if it burst into flames?”

Jared shrugged, aiming puppy-dog eyes at him. “I wanted to do something for you.”

Jensen went from laughing to fighting back tears in the blink of an eyes. He nodded jerkily, leaning forward to press his lips to Jared’s temple. “I know, babe.”

Jared reached down and lifted Jensen on to his lap, where the green-eyed boy happily curled up.

“We have to talk about last night, baby.”

“Let’s take this back up to bed.”


His boyfriend smirked. “Had to make it different to last time.”

“Jerk.”

Once again, instead of throwing him, Jared flopped on to the bed with him. Cuddling up close to him, Jensen wrapped his arms around Jared’s neck as Jared wound his around his waist. “Baby, can you tell me what happened with my dad?”

Jensen bit his lip, not wanting to hurt Jared by relaying the details of the conversation. “He asked me to leave you alone,” Jensen answered simply. “Said I was too weak and that I was putting you in danger.”
But it seemed even the watered down version had his boyfriend on edge. “He thinks you’re not my mate.”

“Yes.” Jensen saw no point in denying that much. “He thinks you’re just lusting after my fine ass,” Jensen grinned, trying to diffuse his boyfriend’s tension. It had the opposite effect.

“So does the rest of the fucking world,” Jared growled, his grip on Jensen’s hips tightening marginally. Jensen tried again.

“They don’t know,” he dead-panned, “that you’re really just lusting after my lasagna.”

Jared burst into surprised laughter, tension draining from him with every chuckle. Jensen grinned in relief, hating to see his mate that upset. Jared pressed their lips together in a lingering kiss, and Jensen tried to map out every ridge to remember. “You’re amazing, baby,” Jared smiled softly.

Jensen continued to rub absently at the knots in Jared’s neck, unconsciously soothing before he spoke. “Jay…you have to be totally honest with me and with yourself right now…having me as a human mate…will that put you and the pack in danger?”

One his mate’s giant hands lifted to cup his face, thumb rubbing gently against the lower line of his jaw. He leaned forward to drop an open-mouthed kiss against Jensen’s jaw bone before answering. “No, mo chroi.” Jensen’s heart stuttered with relief. “You at my side will make us no more vulnerable than you not at my side. Hell, with you by my side, I’d say we have an even better standing. You make me stronger, Jen,” he nuzzled Jensen’s throat. “You make me smarter. Quicker. Better.”

Damn the smoke downstairs for making his eyes tear up.

“You make me better too, Jay,” he admitted roughly.

“So don’t you ever leave me the way you did yesterday,” Jared pleaded in a tiny voice. “Don’t you do that to me again. I love you so fucking much for thinking about me and my pack like that, for wanting to protect us…but I can’t lose you, Jensen. That’s something I know I can’t survive, and I wouldn’t want to. You can’t ever think that I could just go back to the way things were without you…you’ve given my life meaning now, Jen. It’s like I was spending my whole life in shades of black and white, and then you came along, and it was just the massive burst of technicolor. And I can’t ever go back to the dullness again.”

Jensen was blatantly crying now, and he hid his face in Jared’s chest to regain some control. When finally he could move back, Jared butted his nose against Jensen’s, prompting a response. He looked up at the warm and loving hazel eyes boring down on him, and he nodded slowly. He hadn’t seen it like that before, so caught up was he in the awful possibility of Jared getting hurt.

“You’re my technicolor too, Jay,” he mumbled shyly. “No more running. I promise. We stay and talk things out. Together.”

“Agreed,” Jared whispered, leaning down and beginning to nibble on his ear lobe.

“Jay…”

“We forgot a very important part of all this, baby,” Jared growled, the change in voice making Jensen’s cock twitch.

“What?”
“The morning sex.”

###

“I wanna take you somewhere.”

Jensen laughed breathlessly, snuggling back into his boyfriend with a contented hum. “We’re still knotted,” he pointed out, rocking his hips teasingly and moaning with Jared as the movement made Jared’s knot slightly harder. “And we have to go to school. We’ve already missed our first class. Probably gonna miss the next two as well.”

“Let’s skip school,” Jared wheedled. “We’ll spend the whole day cuddling.”

“I thought you wanted to take me somewhere?” Jensen shot back with a grin.

Jared nodded, without missing a beat. “We can cuddle where I wanna take you.”

Jensen laughed. In truth, the idea seemed oddly appealing…no people to worry about, no one trying to break them up or tear them apart, no looking over their shoulders…

Jared buried his face in Jensen’s neck, nibbling on the bright purple marks that decorated his pale skin. “Forget the worlds with me, baby,” he purred huskily. “Let’s take this stitch in time and make it ours. Just ours. Something no one else will be able to touch or take away from us.”

Well, when you put it that way…

What’s one day of school?

~*Jared*~

“What made you stay?”

Jensen glanced at him, taking his eyes away from the scenery outside the window. He squeezed their entwined hands, shooting Jared a curious look.

“You were going to skip town last night,” Jared clarified quietly. “I know you, Jen. What made you stay?” The question had been in his head since last night, and for some reason, he needed to know.

Jensen huffed a tiny laugh, shaking his head. “Believe it or not, Chris told me not to.”

“Chris?!” Jared wasn’t proud of the several octaves his voice had jumped.

Jen nodded, humming in confirmation. “He convinced me saying that he knew about mating than I did, and that it would break you if I left.”

“It would have.” That was something Jared didn’t even need to question.

Jensen tugged at his arm and he looked down at his mate to meet beseeching green orbs. “You can’t let it, Jay. If, God forbid, something happens…”

“Nothing will happen!”
“…then you need to keep going,” Jensen overrode his vehement interruption, speaking passionately. “Your life…it’s defined by so much more than just me. Your family, your pack…you need to keep going. The world isn’t…right, without you.”

“And you don’t think I feel the same about you?” Jared demanded. Jensen took the harsh tone in stride, not even blinking.

“I know you do,” his mate’s voice was far too calm. “But there’s too much waiting for you in life, for you to stop living.”

Jared sighed, his chest constricting. What could he possibly do to explain to Jensen something that he wasn’t even sure he understood?

“What do you think would happen to the moon if the sun fell out of orbit?” he asked quietly. Jensen arched his eyebrow curiously.

“Theoretically? Nothing would exist at all if the sun fell out of orbit. The moon would be pointless.”

Jared waited a beat, until Jensen cottoned on to what he was saying.

His mate didn’t disappoint. “Jared, I’m not…”

“You are,” he interrupted firmly. At the sound of his quiet, steady voice, Jensen stopped; the unyielding, low timbre had a greater effect on his mate than the shouting did. “I wish there was a way to describe how I feel about you. How much I love you. But there isn’t, there isn’t any metaphor that would encompass all that love. Even the sun and the moon doesn’t do it justice. But just so you have an inkling, that’s what you are to me. And I know that’s what I am to you, too. That’s the mating bond. It’s the inherent connection between us as soul-mates, whose counterpoint in found in one another.” He shook his head as the unspeakable possibility reared its head, made him want to gag and scream. “If something were to…” he swallowed hard, trying to fight back his growing nausea at the idea, “then I wouldn’t have the will to keep on. I’m not trying to scare you, it’s just a matter of fact. I’d be pointless.”

Jensen pulled their intertwined hands to press little kisses all over his knuckles. When he felt the first droplet of moisture hit the back of his hand, he immediately pulled over. Gathering Jensen in his arms, he pulled his mate to settle him on his lap, as he’d done so many times before. Jensen straddled him, burying his face in Jared’s neck and allowing him to quietly soothe.

Jared took comfort in the joint rhythm of their beating hearts. It was the same as every other time he’d held Jensen like this, but at the same time, it was wholly different. They were mated now, Jared thrilled in the distinct difference. They belonged to each other, mind, body, heart and soul. Mother Luna herself, Jared decided, wouldn’t be able to spare anyone who tried to separate them now.

Looking out the window, he saw the almost hidden dirt path he’d needed to take just a few feet away. Jensen pulled back, following his gaze.

His mate cleared his throat. “Is that where you wanted to take me?” he asked softly.

“Mm…” Jared nodded, closing his eyes as Jensen began to absently card his hand through Jared’s hair. “Are you up to a walk, baby?”

Jensen hummed his assent, and Jared opened his door, gently lifting Jensen out before hopping out himself. Linking their hands together, he pulled his mate flush against his side and began to lope quietly to the entrance.
To Jensen’s credit, he didn’t once ask where Jared was taking him, seeming content to simply soak in the scenery and the feel of being pressed together. Only when the big cottage finally came into view, did Jensen interrupt the silence.

“Jay, where are we?” he wrinkled his nose. “I don’t think we have the right kind of relationship to be stumbling over a house made of candy in the middle of the woods.”

Jared chuckled fondly, producing a small wrought-iron key from his jeans pocket. “We’re home,” he said simply.

Jensen stopped in his tracks, looking up at Jared in bafflement and a fair amount of concern. “What are you talking about, Jay?”

“My grandparents…the Pack Alpha before my dad and his mate…they stayed here. Pops left the place to me when they passed away,” Jared explained. “He said I should bring my mate here when I find him or her. So I did.”

Jensen’s breath caught, and he drank in the sight of the house with renewed appreciation. Jared was surprised to see the blue orchids along the edge of the cottage still alive and tame, adding to Jensen’s perception of it being a house straight out of a fairytale.

The cottage looked none the worse for wear, considering that it hadn’t been used in over a decade. The cornflower blue paint on the door was peeling a little, and the windows were layered with a sheet of dust, and the chains on the tree swing was completely rusted out, but other than that, it was just like Jared remembered it.

Ever since that first day in chemistry, when Jensen had fallen straight into the protective bracket of his arms, Jared had known that he wanted to bring him here. After everything they’d been through, the thought had taken residence at the back of his mind, but this morning, mated and bonded together in the most intimate way…there was nothing else he could think about.

“It needs some TLC,” he murmured. “And I know we have college to go before we move in to settle, but I wanted you to know…when I think about the future, about our future? This is what I see. You and me, here, together. The details don’t matter. As long as we’re together.”

Jared stretched over the grass with his head in Jensen’s lap, closing his eyes as Jensen played with his hair once more. The weight of the moment dissolved into calm serenity, and Jared felt every fear and doubt that plagued his mind drift away, with every brush of Jensen’s fingers against his scalp.

“What’s your favorite memory of this place?”

Jensen’s voice drifted over him and Jared didn’t open his eyes as he answered promptly. “My Pops had an old ’67 Chevy,” Jared reminisced. “An Impala. When I was a cub, if I was afraid or if I couldn’t sleep, he’d take me out and sit with me in the front, turn on the engine and just let it idle. The purr of the engine always lulled me to sleep, and he’d stay out there for hours with me until I
was asleep, then I’d always wake up in the morning in my own bed.”

“Your Grandfather had a ’67 Impala?” Jensen’s voice was saturated with wonder. “That car is a thing of sheer beauty.”

“It’s out back,” Jared mumbled. “It doesn’t run anymore though.” He chuckled ruefully. “I remember crying the entire day when it finally broke down.”

Jensen aww’ed quietly, continuing to pet him fondly. Jared opened his eyes slowly, peering up at his mate. “What’s your favorite childhood memory?”

Jensen pondered the question for a moment before smiling. “When I was seven, Jody told me that I was adopted and that night, I had a nightmare about the car crash. I was just starting to wonder about my real parents and whether Jody and Eric would leave me eventually, because I wasn’t theirs, and all that amalgamated and I woke up screaming and crying.”

Jared arched his eyebrow. “How is that…”

“Let me finish,” Jensen chided with a grin. “Jody came to my room and cuddled me and rocked me till I fell asleep, and when I woke up in the morning, she was still there, in my little racecar bed. She told me she’d never leave me alone, and when I started to cry again, she just hugged me close and started singing to me.” Jared smiled at the image of a little Jensen, all floppy hair and big green eyes, in a racecar bed and snuggled close in the loving embrace only moms seemed to have. “Eric brought me breakfast in bed,” his mate chuckled. “Chocolate-chip pancakes and chocolate milk. Then they both took the day off work, let me skip a day of school, and we all just stayed in our PJ’s and watched movies and played games…it was the single best day I’d ever had.” Jensen cut his gaze to Jared. “Until I met you.”

Jared smiled and reached up to loop his arms around Jensen’s neck and pull him into a kiss. He was relishing in the sparks igniting every nerve ending in his body…

…until his wolfy senses tingled at the warning of someone approaching.

In an instant, Jared had shifted into his lupine form, a massive hazel brown wolf taking up a protective stance in front of his mate. His muscles coiled, he sniffed the air and growled at the smell of what was distinctly \textit{wolf}, but definitely not \textit{pack}.

\textit{Stand down, Alpha}, a female voice wolf-spoke to him. \textit{I’m here to see Jensen, not hurt him.}

The words had the opposite effect, and Jared snarled as the wolf came closer, ignoring Jensen’s frantic questions in favor of blocking his mate with every inch of his body.

A sand-colored wolf stepped cautiously into their clearing, and he recognized her as Sophia Bush. Jared tensed even further, wondering if this was some sort of ambush and dreading their chances if that were the case.

\textit{What do you want with my mate, Sophia?} He mind-spoke dangerously, a low snarl ripping through his teeth.


\textit{You can hear her?} Jared thought, heart pounding at the startling possibility.

“Of course not,” Jensen snorted, shocking him even more. “I can hear \textit{you}. You know that.”
A light breeze could have knocked Jared on his ass just then, so he was relieved Sophia wasn’t a threat. *You can hear me?!* He cautiously mind-spoke, yipping in delight when Jensen nodded. *That’s awesome!*

“I thought you knew,” Jensen laughed. “You spoke to me all those other times.”

Jared rolled his eyes inwardly. *I didn’t think you could hear me. How is this even possible?*

“Seriously, Jay?” Jensen blinked. “You’re asking me?” If Jared could have, he’d have blushed.

*Right. Sorry. I forgot.*

“You’re a nut case,” Jensen chuckled fondly. “Hey Soph, you mind shifting?” he called out. “I can only understand Jared in his wolf form.”

Oh yeah. The Bush she-wolf.

She flitted into the cover of the trees and emerged a second later in shorts and a sports bra. Jared stayed stubbornly in wolf form, but relented to let her pass to hug Jensen.

“I tracked you,” she explained ruefully. “I was worried when you left on Friday and then you didn’t turn up at school today.”

“It was a rough weekend,” Jensen winced. “But thanks for checking on me.”

“Don’t mention it, Jen-Ster,” she winked. “Now that I’ve seen you’re more than okay,” she wagged her eyebrows playfully and Jared huffed out a chuckle, warming up to the girl. “I’m gonna leave.”

“You know,” Jensen smiled slyly, “I’m helping an old friend up North start an eighteen and under club over here and Chris is bailing me out by performing on the opening night. It’s two weeks from now. You wanna join us?”

Jared smirked at his mate’s attempt at an innocent tone. Chris was gonna go ape-shit when he heard about this, since the Alpha was sure his packmate had agreed to no such thing.

“Sure,” Sophia squeaked, blushing. “I’ll see you then.” She shifted and scurried away, and Jared turned his attention back to Jensen.

*Chris is gonna kill you.*

“I know,” Jensen wrinkled his nose with a smile. “Which is why you’re coming with me to tell him.”

*Don’t worry, baby,* Jared let his tongue loll out playfully. *I’ll protect you from your marshmallow centered big brother.*

“That’s another thing,” Jensen huffed as he settled back in his place. “Why am I the little one? Technically, I’m 24 days older than Chris.”

Jared mentally calculated and took note of his mate’s birthday. *Take it up with Chris.*

“You were less annoying when you thought I couldn’t hear you,” Jensen sniffed, teasing good-naturedly. “Make use of your furry form and come here,” he held out his hands. “I’m cold.”

Jared beamed, cuddling close and damn near purring when Jensen buried his hands in his fur. He tenderly licked a stripe up Jensen’s throat, butting against his mate’s jaw with his muzzle as Jensen laughed.
You really don’t mind my wolf, Jared yipped happily, his Alpha humming in pleasure as Jensen shifted impossibly closer. He rested his head over Jensen’s lap as his mate curled into his body.

“I really, really don’t,” Jensen murmured. After a few minutes of petting, Jensen spoke softly. “You know this isn’t going to last forever Jay. This peace? Your dad isn’t going to stop, and neither will Jake or Sandy. And knowing our luck, Adam might try to get me back. Cas told me in his last visit that Adam was asking after me.”

Jared growled at the confession. Jen’s friend had visited a few weeks ago…and with the way things were going, Jensen was right to assume that the hits would keep on coming.

I’ll protect you baby, he promised vehemently, chest burning with protective rage. I’m never gonna let him hurt you again.

“I know,” Jensen soothed quietly. “Just promise me that, whatever happens, you’ll remember to protect yourself, too. Nothing would hurt me worse than seeing you hurt.”

Jared nuzzled his mate’s abdomen, pushing his shirt up. I promise, baby. We’re going to be okay.

“Just as long as we’re together, right, Jay?” Jared licked lovingly across the exposed stretch Jensen’s stomach.

Just as long as we’re together, baby. Neither wolf- nor human-world stands a chance.

###

Chapter End Notes

The nerves are killing me! Hope y’all enjoyed!

Much love! -J
A World of Our Own

Chapter Notes

We're past 1000 comments! Le gasp! I can't even begin to describe how humbled and amazed I am! Thank you, thank you, thank you all so much!

This chapter is for cheery_pie, because whether she realized it or not, she was my 1000th comment! And happy belated birthday to j2_is_life! Your birthday fic is in the works, hon ;-) Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

Huh, Jensen thought hazily, of all the things trying to take me out, I’d have never put money on this.

“I’m going to fucking kill you, freckles!”

Jensen flinched inwardly at the shout and quickly ducked behind Jared, punching the column of his boyfriend’s spine when he chuckled lowly.

“Chris, just listen,” he tried to placate, holding out his hand in a peaceful gesture. Inwardly, he quickly calculated his chances of getting to Jared’s truck before Chris caught up with him, and he was forced to conclude that they weren’t very good.

After lazing the rest of the day at Jared’s grandfather’s- their- cabin, Jensen had asked Jared to swing by Chris’ place. He wanted to get telling his best friend about Sophia over and done with, and he knew too that the blue-eyed boy would have been anxious the entire day without knowing where he was.

Now, he wondered whether it would have been better to call. Thank you kindly, Hindsight.

“Listen to what?” Chris seethed, coming to a stop in front of Jared and glaring at him. “How you blatantly disregarded everything I told you, or how you’re roping me into something I never agreed to, that will likely send the girl I love running in the opposite direction?”

Jensen’s chest squeezed painfully at the anger in his brother’s tone. “Don’t be so dramatic,” he replied softly, his arms coming to cross over his chest in a defensive move he hadn’t even thought about. “You’re an awesome singer, and you know the band, and you both want to spend time together, y’all are just too stubborn to set it up yourselves.”

“So you thought you’d just play puppet master and pull the strings, is that it?” Chris bit off, and this time, Jensen visibly winced. It was an unfair blow, especially after Chris’ own stunt with the J.A.W Initiative, but what hurt the most was how Chris seemed to think he was being blasé and callous about this, when the truth was the furthest thing from it.
The newfound strength of their mating bond showed itself when Jared growled testily at Chris, his stance becoming protective and vaguely threatening around Jensen as he sensed the deep hurt in his mate.

“Watch yourself, Kane,” he warned lowly, jaw clenched.

Ignoring Jared, Chris kept steely blue eyes on him. “She’s my mate, and I told you I didn’t want to hurt her,” he snapped. “I don’t expect you to understand and appreciate mating, being that you’re just a human, but at least respect it.”

The funny thing about words are that once they’re out there, they’re there forever, and nothing you do can take them back.

Chris’ face drained of all its color as he realized what he’d said, and Jensen jerked backwards, as though he’d been shot. Insurmountable pain crushed his chest, and while he could usually brush off Chris’ words the few times they were in anger, this time, after what happened with Jared’s father, it hit a little too close to home.

He took a shaky step back, unable to mask the raw pain that he knew was ravaging his features. Jensen managed to retain the state of mind enough to hold Jared’s arm, knowing that if he let go, the Alpha was likely to instinctively attack the source of his pain. He swallowed hard, squeezing Jared’s bicep as his mate began to tremble with restrained anger, stubbornly avoiding looking at Chris.

“Jensen…” Chris breathed, distraught.

“Take me home, please,” he managed to push the words past his frozen lips, tugging Jared’s arm and fighting the urge to run. He couldn’t face Chris, not with the words so raw and fresh between them, without the threat of crumbling apart. “Please, Jay.”

Chris took a step towards him, regret and pain evident in his face, but for everything between them, this wasn’t something he could forget easily. “Jensen, I’m…”

“Back off, Christian,” Jared bit off sharply, his hazel eyes flashing fire. He swiftly turned around, bundling Jensen in the protective bracket of his arms before gently ushering him to the truck, murmuring nonsensically under his breath. The gentleness with which he treated Jensen was a harsh counterpoint to his attitude towards Chris. “I got you, baby. I’m here, I gotcha.”

Jensen huddled into himself in the truck, staunchly refusing to look at the spot he knew his best friend was frozen in, remorse and guilt plain as day in his azure eyes. Damn it, but after all his understanding, Jensen just couldn’t let go this time. This time, it had gone too far, and this time, forgiveness would have to wait until the wound wasn’t gaping and gushing.

###

“Josh!”

Jensen bolted upright, the name leaving his lips in a breathy gasp as his heart pounded rapidly in his chest. He panted, eyes wild, trying to ascertain where he was and how he got there.

Slowly, the warmth at his back permeated his awareness and slow, soothing strokes of a big hand convinced him that if anything else, Jared was with him. Just the knowledge of that, and Jensen calmed down. Leaning back to snuggle into his boyfriend, he waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, breathing a quiet sigh of relief when the murky shapes in front of him began to take form, and look more like a wardrobe and dresser and desk, than random black splotches.
He was in his bedroom.

“What happened?” he mumbled fuzzily, unconsciously burrowing closer into the comforting arms around him.

“You fell asleep in the truck, and I didn’t have the heart to wake you,” Jared answered, his voice sounding strange. Picking up easily on the change and feeling some of his mate’s anxiety and anger as a phantom ache in his chest, Jensen turned in Jared’s arms, allowing his hands to find Jared’s face and gently cradle it.

“What’s the matter?”

Jared huffed a slight growl. “Who’s Josh?” he demanded, jealousy making him tighten his grip on Jensen marginally.

Jensen laughed, for the first time since facing Chris. Tenderly, he pressed a kiss to the corner of Jared’s mouth. “Nothing like what you think,” he assured his boyfriend, chuckling when Jared immediately relaxed fractionally. “This is going to sound crazy,” Jensen wrinkled his nose, “but Josh was my imaginary friend when I was a kid.”

“You have dreams about your imaginary friend?” Jared asked, disbelief coloring his tone.

Jensen sighed. “I told you it was gonna sound crazy,” he muttered. “I don’t know what to tell you, Jay. I’ve been dreaming of him since as far back as I can remember. Gun to my head, I’d say they started when I was around 3?” Jensen took a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing. “It’s always the same dream. He’s always around 7 years old, and we’re always in some kind of maze. And I’m terrified because I can’t find him, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I know that’s not right, because I know Josh would never leave me.” He shook his head ruefully. “I always wake up calling out for him, because that’s what I do in the dream, I scream for him, over and over. The only thing I’m sure of, in my dream, is that Josh protects me, and he loves me, almost like a brother.”

“Did you ever encounter this Josh when you were awake?” Jared asked bemused.

The green-eyed boy shook his head in frustration. “No. Which never made sense to me since he was supposed to be imaginary.” He blew out his breath in a tired huff. “I haven’t had that dream in over 7 months.”

Mouthing over Jared’s collar bone, he tried to forget everything but being there in his boyfriend and lover’s arms. Arousal swept over him, and he rocked his hips into Jared, gasping when the Alpha growled and promptly slid his hand down to grope covetously at the curve of his ass.

“Jay…” he moaned softly, biting lightly at the inward curve of Jared’s shoulder bone. He wanted to forget every fucking thing except Jared and the feel of his mate inside him. “Want you.”

The muted confession spurred Jared into action, and in one swift motion, he lifted Jensen and turned on to his back, so that Jensen was straddling him. Moaning helplessly at the manhandling, which turned him on more than he cared to admit, Jensen rocked down, pressing their hardening crotches against each other. Jared’s hands found their way underneath his jeans, and long fingers were probing against his still-tender hole.

Jensen relished in the feeling, pushing back against Jared’s fingers and reaching a hand between their bodies to rub the bulge in front of Jared’s jeans. “Jesus, fuck,” Jared groaned, pushing one finger into him, using the other hand to hold him apart. “That’s it, baby boy.”

Emboldened, he flicked the button on Jared’s jeans and slipped his hand underneath the black boxers
his boyfriend wore, gently teasing the smooth, hard, hot length in his hands. In the back of his mind, he wondered why he never protested all of Jared’s nicknames for him; God knew he only allowed ‘JR’ and ‘Jen’ normally; but for some reason, he found every little endearment made him love Jared even more, turned him on even more, in ways he couldn’t help but question.

Leaning down, he nibbled at Jared’s throat, moaning and pushing back wantonly when Jared slipped a second finger from his other hand alongside the first. He circled his hips, rubbing their cocks together, rough denim against smooth boxers. Jared tightened his hold on Jensen’s ass, holding him flush in place, which Jensen found he wasn’t really opposed to since he kept licking and sucking at Jared’s pulse point. He grinned when he pulled back and saw the blood rush to the surface; he could finally understand Jared’s obsession with marking him up.

He redirected his attention to Jared’s ear as his boyfriend slowly worked him open, sucking seductively at the ear lobe and letting his mouth run about every single dirty thought that had ever crossed his mind. Jared seemed on the edge of losing his control, and the power that flushed through Jensen at being able to have that effect on the big, strong Alpha werewolf, was almost dizzying.

Until it all abruptly ended with the slamming of a door.

Jensen bolted upright, terror chilling the heat that desire had spread through his limbs. There was only one person who had a key to the house besides him.

“Jensen! You here, boy?”

Oh, God.

OhGodOhGodOhGod.

Eric.

“Calm down, baby,” Jared’s voice came over him, penetrating his fog of inactivity. His boyfriend was fixing his shirt and buttoning up their jeans, all the while shooting worried looks at him. “He sounds sober, it’ll be okay.”

He realized belatedly that he’d spoken his foster father’s name out loud. “He’s gonna flip, Jared!” he squeaked, his fear making him uncaring of the tenor his voice had pitched to. “Fuck, Jared, you have to leave, you have to leave right now.”

“No,” Jared’s answer was firm, swift and calm. “I’m not leaving you alone to deal. What if he’s not as sober as he sounds?”

“He’s not gonna hurt me,” Jensen spoke sharply, the lies thick on his tongue. Panic flared inside him at Jared’s words; did he know? Did he have an idea or a suspicion that Eric was less than friendly when he’d had a few rounds of Jack or Jose?

“I know,” Jared nodded, confusion settling in his eyes at the sigh of relief Jensen couldn’t hold back. Jared didn’t know. “That doesn’t mean I want to leave you alone.”

Jensen shot off the bed, grabbing his jacket from the wardrobe and yanking it on, zipping it all the way to hide his hiccups. “Please, Jay, I don’t think…”

“You’re worrying too much,” Jared cut in flippantly. “I’m gonna meet your dad, and everything is gonna be okay.”

Alarmed anger stole Jensen’s breath, making him struggle to take in air. Before he could say
something nasty enough to drive Jared away, his bedroom door swung open.

“Boy, what…” Eric stopped dead when he saw Jared standing sheepishly at the foot of the bed, Jensen frozen at his dresser sporting a deer-in-the-headlights look.

*God, please let Eric wait to kill me until after Jared leaves. Please don’t let Eric hurt him.*

“Jensen?” Eric’s confused voice was directed at him, and Jensen took in a shuddery breath, his heart pounding like a bass drum against his ribs. Moving instinctively, he went to stand next to Jared, angling his body slightly in front of him in a protective gesture that he was glad escaped his boyfriend’s attention.

“Hi, Sir,” Jared’s warm, polite voice almost had Jensen cracking a smile. Ever the charming gentleman, his boyfriend.

“Um…” Jensen hesitated, wondering what to call him. Calling him by his name would have been suspicious, but trying to force the word ‘dad’ out of his mouth would have been like heaving up razors. Eric flinched, seeming aware of his dilemma. “This is Jared,” he finally pushed the words out, blushing profusely. Feeling some of the hesitant anxiety Jared was projecting over their mating bond, Jensen added, “my boyfriend.”

He waited for the outburst, muscles tensed in preparation to do whatever necessary to protect his mate, when…

…Eric smiled.

It was a ghost of the smirk he used to wear, and a poor replacement for the grin he used to sport when he played baseball and football in the yard with Jensen when he was a kid, but it was still an effort. Jensen was frozen in place, shock short-circuiting his brain.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jared,” he nodded, looking weary, a bittersweet edge to his features that Jensen didn’t quite understand.

It was hard not to react to the relief and happiness mellowing Jared out, and Jensen smiled slightly reflexively. He relaxed his shoulders and sent a quick thank you to whoever might have been listening to, and granted his pleas.

“It’s great to meet you too, Sir,” Jared grinned brightly, gently angling past Jensen and thrusting his hand out. Jensen swallowed his relief when Eric shook his boyfriend’s hand, still civil. Had he stepped into twilight zone? Had to be.

“I gotta run,” Jared’s hand went to the back of his neck as he smiled ruefully at Jensen. “My mom will be wondering where I am.”

With a start, Jensen realized that Jared hadn’t made a move to contact his family since last night. He groaned inwardly, wondering how much the Padaleckis must hate him now.

“Will you be okay?” he asked tentatively, mindful of Eric’s gaze on him but needing Jared to read the hidden question in his words.

Which, he did. “I’ll be okay,” he nodded affirmatively. “I’ll see you at school tomorrow, Jen. Good night, Sir.”

Jensen only relaxed his guard with the second slam of the door downstairs. Gulp, he faced Eric, trembling slightly. He would face his beating head-on, he decided, his breath coming out a shade...
faster. Eric’s hand came up…

…and Jensen jumped violently when it came down with infinite gentleness on his shoulder.

“Easy, Jensen,” Eric mumbled, sounding grief-stricken and sick. “I’m not gonna…I won’t…I…”

What in all hell was going on here?

He blinked owlishly at the man while he seemed to be trying to find the right words. Eric chewed on his bottom lip, and Jensen idly realized that he’d picked up the same habit, before turning his attention back to his foster father.

“I went to your mother’s grave this weekend,” Eric spoke softly. Jensen jerked slightly once more, startled at Eric calling Jody his mom. Something he hadn’t done since Jody died. “There’s flowers growing at her tombstone. That was…was you, wasn’t it?”

Jensen nodded wordlessly. After her funeral, he’d go every few days to the cemetery to tend to the flowers, and after he’d left, the caretaker had promised to maintain their upkeep, seeming touched at the lengths Jensen had gone through over the years to ensure they grew.

“I was probably drunk at home while you were doing it,” Eric bit off bitterly, but this time, Jensen knew the anger was directed inwardly, and not at him. Eric looked at him, a silent plea in his world-weary eyes.

“I’d apologize in a second if I’d’a thought it’d make a lick of difference,” he admitted finally, guilt and self-recrimination thick in his tone. “But I know that won’t cut it. But I do want you to know…I am gonna…I’m gonna try, Jensen. Truly, this time, I will.”

Jensen flashed back to all the apologies that he’d still gotten when he was a kid, and wondered whether he’d stopped believing them at the same time that Eric had stopped offering them. There was one thing different though…in all those apologies before, there’d been promises and excuses. Now? The only thing Eric was promising was to try. There were no lies and embellishments this time, and for some reason, that made all the difference in the world.

He was going to try…not the best reassurance, but so much truer than blind oaths to stop. Honestly? Jensen quite preferred it.

“There’s leftover casserole in the fridge,” he offered hesitantly, unable to respond to everything else just yet. Thankfully, Eric seemed to understand that much and he offered Jensen a small smile, more open than the one he’d given Jared.

“I’ll nuke it,” he nodded, walking away. He stopped for a second at the doorway, hesitating as he laid his palm on the doorjamb. “You know, Jensen, your uncle was gay. My brother?”

“Yeah?” Jensen flinched, a blush burning his face crimson. He couldn’t deny the part of him that thrummed with happiness, though. That part of him that was there since he was a kid, that craved for Eric to acknowledge his blood as Jensen’s own, too. Whether he realized it or not, by referring to Jody and his brother as Jensen’s, he was soothing an ache in the boy that had been festering for years.

“I know,” Jensen nodded, bailing the man out from finding the words.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “I was the first one he came to when he realized because he knew I was the only one in the family who wouldn’t freak out. Who would accept him as he was.” Eric hesitated. “I hope you know that…well, the same thing goes…I could never…I wouldn’t…”

“I know,” Jensen nodded, bailing the man out from finding the words.
“I’m glad that he loves you,” Eric commented softly, a stark honesty in his words. “I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t tell me, but I’m glad he looks at you like…” Eric swallowed hard, before meeting Jensen’s eyes with tears in his own. “Looks at you like I used to look at her,” he finished gruffly.

Jensen’s throat tied up suddenly, and he coughed, trying to get rid of the damning evidence. As Eric turned to leave, he blurted out unthinkingly. “Sobriety looks good on you, sir.”

Eric chuckled faintly, seeing the comment for the unspoken thank you that it was. “Go to sleep, you little smartass,” he shook his head, the first sign of affection coloring his tone in 10 years.

Jensen slept better than he had in a long, long time.

~*Jared*~

“Is that a wolf?”

Jared looked on from the doorway to the art room, still unnoticed by his mate, who was totally absorbed in his work and all the more beautiful doing it. Jared’s jaw tightened as the scrawny little brunette peaked over his mate’s shoulder, looking at Jensen’s canvas.

“Yup,” Jen nodded, subtly maneuvering the kid out of his personal space, and Jared was glad he did because it’d be a pain to convince his parents that he’d killed the kid for the greater good of the rest of the world. “It’s a wolf in a meadow, with a star above him. It’s going to be the new centerpiece to my portfolio, since the Queen Bitch destroyed my other piece.”

Jared’s anger spiked at the newfound knowledge that his crazy ex-girlfriend had attacked Jensen’s work.

“You didn’t tell me Sandy destroyed your art, baby.”

Jensen’s smile stretched wide over his face as Jared loped towards him, a frown on his face.

“Doesn’t matter,” he grinned reassuringly, turning the sketch to show him. Jared’s eyes widened as he saw the sweeping lines and curves that made up what was undoubtedly his Wolf on the page, in the meadow that was clearly their spot, with the Jay-Star hanging above him. The sketch took his breath away, and he fought the urge to sweep his mate up in a devastating kiss. Not only was it extraordinarily beautiful, but it meant that much more to him that no one except Jen and him would get the full meaning to the painting. “I’m calling it A World of Our Own,” his mate revealed with a secret smile, and Jared warmed at the love he felt pulsating over their mating bond. “Whaddaya think?”

“Why a star, and not a moon?” the kid wondered, scrutinizing his Jensen’s work. “Although it does fit beautifully. You drew the wolf so realistically.”

Jared bristled at the open admiration, hero-worship and blatant puppy-love the boy exhibited. If they were in a cartoon, he thought irritably, there’d be stars in the kid’s eyes.

“Who are you?” he asked mildly, taking a possessive step towards his mate.

“Jay, this is Connor, he’s a friend of mine and a fellow art-nerd,” Jensen grinned absently as he fixed something on the sketch, blissfully unaware of the tension surrounding him. “Con, this is my
boyfriend Jared.”

“Oh,” the sparkle in the boy’s eyes faded slightly as he took Jared’s offered hand, shaking it firmly. “Nice to meet you.”

Sure it is, he thought snidely, keeping the comment to himself lest he annoy Jensen with his caveman tendencies, as he called them.

Connor bailed not long after, thankfully enough, claiming he had a class to get to. Frankly, Jared was glad of it, and he pulled Jensen back into his chest as soon as the kid was gone. Leaning down, he trailed kisses up and down the slender column of Jensen’s throat, reveling in the sounds he tore from his responsive mate. It took all his willpower not to dip his hands down the front of Jensen’s jeans, and it seemed his boyfriend shared no such restraint as he rocked his ass back against Jared’s hardening crotch.

“Baby, you gotta stop unless you wanna become an exhibitionist,” Jared growled lowly, slowing Jensen’s motions with his hands on Jensen’s hips. Even as he did, he couldn’t help but press his hard-on flush against the curve of Jensen’s ass, keeping it there as he bit a mark into the arch of Jensen’s shoulder, eliciting a full-body shiver and a sexy, bitten off whine.

“Not playing fair,” Jensen breathed heavily, when he finally regained his senses. Jared chuckled, easing off his mate and gripping him lightly around his stomach as he willed away his erection, entertaining thoughts of Chad in stilettos and a boob-tube.

“So,” he nudged Jensen’s jaw with his nose once he was back in control. “You wanna tell me how long you’re gonna use the art room to hide from Chris? I’m just curious what you’re gonna do when they actually have a class here.”

“I’m not avoiding Chris,” he mate denied, flushing. Jared rolled his eyes.

“Jen, baby,” he spoke gently, “Amelia is just about the ditziest, sleepiest girl in our class, and she even noticed that you haven’t been sitting in your normal place next to him.”

Flinching, Jensen averted his eyes, hurt radiating through their bond and registering as a ghost pain in Jared’s chest. “I can’t do this with him, yet.”

“It’s been three days. He’s distraught, Jen,” Jared pointed out softly. He was the first one who wanted to rip Chris’ lungs out for daring to talk to his mate the way he did, but even he had to admit that the long-haired alpha was in a bad way, punishing himself for his words way more than Jared or Jensen could have. “I’m mad as all hell too, but you know he didn’t mean it. He spoke in anger.”

“I know,” Jensen nodded, sounding guilty. “It’s just…”

“Just what, baby?”

“I trusted him not to hurt me, and he did,” came the pained whisper. “And it isn’t about what he said, it’s about the fact that he also probably sees me as just human, at least some part of him does. I can rally against anyone else, but the minute my own best friend, my own brother, starts to believe that? There’s nothing left to fight against.”

“Don’t say that!” Jared’s fierce growl did nothing to phase his mate. “Don’t you say that.”

“I don’t know that Chris believes in me anymore,” he confessed. “That scares the hell out of me.”

Jared wished there was something he could say, anything he could do to show Jensen exactly how
much he meant to the blue-eyed alpha. “Jen, I never pretended to understand this amazing relationship you and Chris have,” he levelled with his mate. “And I can’t find the words that can describe how wrong you are about Chris not believing in you, because let me just tell you, the last time I saw Chris in this rough shape, it was when he lost his entire family on the worst night of his life.”

Jensen sucked in a breath through his teeth, aiming worried eyes at the floor as he gnawed on his lip anxiously.

“I’m not saying that to guilt you,” Jared reached up and freed the swollen lip from Jensen’s gnashing. “I’m just telling you because it seems to me like Chris wouldn’t feel that much, take it that hard, if it was someone he didn’t care about. And Chris tends not to care about people he doesn’t believe in.”

“I know. I…” Jensen huffed, running a hand through his soft spikes. “I know.”

“Just say you’ll think about hashing things out,” Jared suggested, not wanting to push his mate. “I don’t know that I can handle Chris looking like a kicked pup for much longer.”


“Hardly. Kicked pups have a lashing-out stage if the pain doesn’t abate. And I like my ass too much to be in the line of fire for that.”

Jared relished in the sweet sound of Jensen’s laughter. Damn if it wasn’t becoming a rare commodity these days.

~*Jensen*~

Slamming his locker in frustration, Jensen cursed a blue streak and hefted his backpack on to his sore shoulders.

For a Friday morning, this one sucked out loud.

He missed the bus and had to walk in the rain, he had to skip English because he had to change into his gym clothes- the only dry clothes he had- and now he missed ten minutes of his free that he was going to use painting, because he still couldn’t open his Goddamn locker!

And…he missed Chris like a fucking limb.

Not because he helped with Jensen’s locker, and not because he’d have fetched Jensen in the morning if he’d have called. No…He missed Chris for all the smartass comments and the way he always stuck so protectively by him. He missed Chris for all the exchanged looks in Chemistry class that spoke a whole conversation between them. He missed Chris for all the brotherly banter he’d never had, and never knew how much he needed. He missed Chris because he missed his brother.

Which really just sucked out loud.

Because Jensen was entitled to feel angry, damn it! He was well within his rights to never speak to Chris again. Yet the possibility hurt him even more than Chris’ words.

*Guess that’s what being a brother is about,* he deduced with an inward grumble. *Forgiving each*
Jensen huffed a small sigh, resolving to find Chris after his free and talk things out with him. A week without talking to each other was long enough…he just hoped that things hadn’t gotten to the stage or irreparable. He yanked at the door to the art room, stopping dead at the sight that met his eyes.

Six canvases were lined up next to each other, the first five with the letters S-O-R-R-Y painted on each of them respectively, and the last canvas holding a crudely drawn crying face. Next to it, Chris stood with his hands in his pockets, scuffing his sneakers against the linoleum floor, the tips of his ears turning pink.

“I was planning on trying something a little more artistic, but then I remembered that I couldn’t draw for shit,” he mumbled.

Jensen laughed, a full-belied laugh that he hadn’t given in a long-ass time. They were going to be just fine.

###

“So you’re gonna be singing with Chris on the opening night?” Jared asked him, brightening.

Jensen hummed and nodded the affirmative. Honestly, offering to sing with him, even though Jensen was a hopeless singer, was the least he could do, given that he’d roped Chris into it in the first place. He sighed heavily. “Don’t dump me when you hear my singing voice,” he teased Jared with a grin, turning his attention back to his list of possible venues to rent out for the club space.

It was a lot harder than he thought it would be, setting things up. Benny had given him carte blanche with a budget, which helped a little, but the kicker was setting up the right atmosphere. He enjoyed a challenge though, and this was a paying challenge, so he wasn’t complaining.

They were going to check out the last location on the list today, and then Jensen had to meet with the band that was agreeing to play for them for four out of the seven nights. He shot off a text to Eric, deciding that if his foster father was going to try, then he would too, and he felt a weight leave his shoulders when he received a reply telling him to stay safe.

He may have stepped into a twilight zone, but damn if Jensen wasn’t going to make the most of it.

Shoving his lists into his backpack, he stood up, dusting off his jeans as he did so. They were sprawled on the football field, and Jared had just finished practice. He shooed his boyfriend to the change rooms, knowing that they wouldn’t be on time to meet with the landlord if Jared didn’t haul ass.

His phone buzzed in his hand, and he answered it without looking at the caller ID. “Yeah?”

“JR, what’s up bro?” Aldis’ warm voice came over the speaker, making Jensen smile nostalgically.

“Hey Al,” he greeted, pausing for a minute to interpret Jared’s enthusiastic hand motions. “Jared says hi,” he added, rolling his eyes at his boyfriend’s crazed attempt at gesturing. Jared grinned at him.

“Tell the White Bread I said hey,” Aldis chuckled, and Jensen relayed the message with a smirk.

“I’m not white bread!” Jared protested, pouting like a puppy. Instinctively, Jensen reached up and pushed his hair behind his ear.

“No, you’re not, babe,” he soothed. “Aldis is just a jerk.”
“And you’re a can of whipped cream, JR,” his friend crowed. “God, if the badasses that tremble at the sound of your name could see you now.”

“You know they won’t,” he retorted. “Look, I gotta bounce in a second, man. What’s the word?”

“There was a guy here looking for you, man,” Aldis reported, a hint of worry in his tone.

Jensen’s blood chilled in his veins as he grabbed Jared’s arm, making his boyfriend stop in his tracks. As soon as he registered the look of fear on Jensen’s face, Jared’s smile disappeared, a grim look replacing it.

With his hands barely noticeably trembling, Jensen pressed a few buttons on his phone. “You’re on speaker, Al. The guy who came looking for me…was it…could it have been…”

“It wasn’t Adam,” Aldis assured him immediately, realizing where Jensen’s train of thought had gone. He let out a massive sigh of relief, body going weak as he leaned against Jared. “Naw, the little bastard wouldn’t have dared. I told him I’d shoot him if I ever saw him again. Would serve the little bitch right for daring to cheat on my friend.”

Jensen laughed hollowly. “Who was the guy? Can you tell me what he looked like?” Anyone else but Adam, he could handle.

“I can do you one better,” Aldis offered. “I can tell you his name.”

Jensen waited patiently, taking comfort from Jared’s thumb rubbing circles on his hip.

“His name is Josh,” Aldis told them. “JR… he says he’s your brother.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Le gasp! Again! So Josh is real...will he bring complications to the happy couple, or will he be a source of happy in the story? Watch this space to find out! And for those of you who feel cheated with the Eric scene, don’t worry! This is so not the end of Eric's drama...just a brief interlude...the calm before the storm, if you will!
Jensen hated halfway diners.

It was a fairly recent development—give or take 43 minutes old—and it was based solely on the fact that she was late.

He bounced his leg up and down, half-finished milkshake forgotten on the table in front of him, trying to dispel his nervous energy. Jared’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he sent him a sympathetic look, hand falling on Jensen’s knee to still his motion.

“You’re gonna drive yourself nuts, baby,” his boyfriend warned him in a low voice, his other hand lifting to gently caress his jaw. Jensen huffed a sigh, rubbing a hand over his face.

“How do you know I haven’t already?” he asked sardonically, squeezing his eyes shut against the onslaught of reality his thoughts brought him. “I may or may not have a real brother that I thought was imaginary for the past 16 years. Sounds pretty nutty to me.”

Jared frowned, grabbing his hand to rub it soothingly between his massive palms. “Stop that, Jen. You were all of two years old, stop beating yourself up over this. If Josh is real—and that’s still an if—then it isn’t your fault you forgot him, or thought you made him up. That’s entirely rational, and frankly, it was his job as the older brother to come looking for you. If anything, you should be pissed off it took him this long.”

“If I remem…if I dreamed it right,” he amended, consternation scrunching his eyebrows, “then Josh was only seven when the accident happened. He was a kid himself, how could he possibly have done anything?”

“Exactly,” Jared grinned toothily. “Now why don’t you afford yourself that same understanding, while I phone your aunt and ask her where she is?”
“Don’t,” Jensen waved a hand, choosing to ignore the regrettably infallible logic his boyfriend presented him with. “I don’t want her to have any idea of the time frame it took us to get here. She might be able to use that to figure out where I live, or at least have a rough idea of the surrounding radius of our proximity to here.”

Jared arched an eyebrow at him. “That’s JR talking,” he observed with concern. “Why don’t you trust her? She is your family, Jen.”

“There’s a massive difference between blood and family, Jay,” Jensen shrugged, not remorseful for all the precautions he was taking. “She’s my blood. You and Chris are my family.” Jensen spared a moment to enjoy Jared’s bright, responding smile, before adding, “Besides, everything just seemed too…” he frowned, casting in his mind for the right word. “Scripted.”

“How do you mean?”

“Meeting after all these years,” Jensen bit his lip. “The way she suddenly wants part of my life. It’s the plot of a really bad lifetime movie. And she lied about trying to find me, I know because she was my listed guardian, and if she were so inclined, she would have had the power of attorney to access my case files. There’s something about her I just don’t trust,” he concluded, swinging his eyes up to meet slanted hazel orbs. “I’d rather she not be near my home until I can put my finger on the bad feeling I have.”

Jared nodded slowly, taking in the information. “Why do you think she lied about trying to find you?”

“I dunno,” Jensen shrugged helplessly. “To earn my trust by starting with my forgiveness? For some reason, she wants to be a part of my life. I just don’t think that reason is sudden, unexpected maternal instincts.”

Jared scrunched his nose up, looking dubious. “I trust your instincts, Jen,” he acknowledged reassuringly, “but I honestly can’t think of any other reasons. I mean, did your parents leave you something that she’d go to such lengths to get?”

“Not really,” Jensen shook his head, thinking back. “They left me a trust that becomes available to me on my twentieth birthday…but she has more than enough money herself, I think.”

“Maybe it’s guilt for leaving her nephew,” Jared suggested. “Letting her sister down.”

Jensen hummed, not convinced, but sensing they were reaching an impasse. “Maybe.”

“Look,” Jared pulled his hand up to press a kiss to the inside of his wrist. “Whatever is going on, we’ll deal with it. Like I said, I trust your instincts, so we’ll just keep our guard up a while.”

Jensen blew out the breath that lodged itself in his throat, wearily grateful for the show of solidarity. Nodding his head, he searched his mind for a topic change before he legitimately drove himself around the bend. “How’s your…?” Jensen’s voice cords rebelled around the word ‘dad’. “How’s things at home?” he amended. “I hope you didn’t get into trouble with your folks.” He flinched, feeling self-loathing creep up on him at the animosity he had stirred with his presence. When was he going to stop hurting Jared with his very existence?

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop,” Jared frowned at him, squeezing his hand and pulling him closer. “I can feel you blaming yourself over our mating bond,” he clarified when Jensen glanced at him in shock. “Sunday night was not your fault, baby. The only person to blame is my father,” Jared scowled darkly. “He had no right…”
“He had his right,” Jensen refuted quietly, surprised at his own defense of the man. “As pack alpha, and as your father.”

“I told him that I didn’t want to be pack alpha at the expense of you,” Jared lifted his chin in defiance. “I don’t want to be his son at the expense of you, either.”

“Don’t say that,” Jensen admonished his lover, even as his treacherous heart warmed. “He’s your family, Jared!”

“There’s a massive difference between blood and family, Jen,” Jared parroted back to him, earning himself an exasperated eye-roll. “I love my father so much, God knows I’ve emulated him my entire life…but,” Jared shrugged sadly, “if he can’t accept that you are my mate, and the love of my life, then I can’t accept that he’s my dad. I love the pack too much to make them pick a side... And as much as I love the pack and my family, I love you even more. My decision is easily made, even if it’s difficult to face.”

“I don’t want to make you choose, Jay,” Jensen whispered regretfully, insides clenching at the thought of the strain it could put on their relationship down the road, if he made Jared do that. “Why don’t I talk to your dad?”

“And tell him what?” Jared asked baldly. “The man is as stubborn as the day is long, and he’s convinced he knows best.”

Jensen arched his eyebrow at his boyfriend, a sudden grin quirking his lips. “Sounds like someone else I know,” he shot back cheekily. Jared pouted and swiped Jensen’s milkshake in retaliation, gulping down a sip and smiling sunnily at Jensen’s responding mock scowl.

“Jen,” Jared leveled with him, dragging the knuckle of his index finger across his bottom lip in a gesture of frustration, “my mom and Megan have accepted you- hell, they probably love you more than me- half the pack has already accepted you… even Jeff, who hasn’t even met you yet, has accepted you and our mating. Why can’t my dad?”

Shrugging helplessly, Jensen brought their joined hands up to nuzzle them comfortingly. “I don’t know. I guess he’s just protective, and this is his way of showing it. He doesn’t want you to make a mistake.”

“You’re not a mistake.”

“Your dad seems to think I am,” Jensen stated matter-of-factly, ignoring Jared’s growl. “And I, personally, can’t fault the man for protecting you, unwarranted though it may be.”

“Which is just even more proof of the fact that you’re my mate,” Jared shook his head adamantly. “Honestly, my mom isn’t even defending him.”

“She isn’t?”

“Nope,” Jared popped his lips on the ‘p’. “She isn’t icing him out the way Megan and I am, but she keeps muttering under her breath, threatening to whack him upside the head with her spoon, and she put salt instead of sugar into his morning coffee on Monday, saying that it matched the sour words he spouted off to you.”

Jensen huffed a surprised laugh, shaking his head. “Your mom is a force of nature.”

“She’s something else,” Jared nodded, grinning. “She loves you, you know.”
Jensen’s eyes burned and he pulled his hand away from Jared’s to rub his face, willing away the budding tears. “’S’been a long time since I felt that, Jay.”

“What do you remember of your real mom, Jen?” Jared asked curiously, softening his tone as he scooted closer to compensate for losing the contact between their hands.

Jensen mulled the question over for a few minutes, composing himself as much as he was trying to remember. “I remember that she had the awesome laugh ever,” he smiled suddenly, the vague echo of light, carefree laughter ringing in his ears. “She laughed with her heart and body and soul. And I remember her going down a slide with me once, in a park?” He searched his mind for more, looking for something more concrete than the vague impressions and feelings he had left. “I’m not sure whether my mind made this up,” he admitted quietly, “but I remember her voice, as she tucked me in, telling me…”

“…’I’ll love you forever, and for always, whether I’m in your life, or in your memories.’”

Jensen started at the melancholic voice that took the words out of his mouth. His Aunt stood behind him; close, but…

“How did you hear that?” he blurted unthinkingly.

Katherine Talley smiled, coming to take a seat opposite the couple. “She would tell you that every night,” the woman revealed with a smile, ignoring Jensen’s question. “I guess she was right about you always remembering her.” She gestured to the waitress for a coffee, before turning to meet Jensen’s speculative eyes. “I’m so glad you contacted me, JR.”

Jensen’s muscles locked down, his walls coming up so fast it was with almost audible sound. “How do you know that name?” he demanded flatly, emotion seeping out of his face as he blanked his eyes. His Aunt flushed deeply, and the vein in her throat jumped.

“I…It’s um…isn’t your second name Ross?” she fumbled, blushing harder. “I just thought…Josh used to call you that, so…”

“Josh?” Jensen paled at the mention of his- brother’s?- name. Immediately, he was filled with anxiety, overriding his hesitations. “Who is…is he…”

“He was your brother,” Katherine answered, puzzled. “You don’t remember?”

“Was?” Jensen picked the word out, ignoring the question. “What do you mean, was?”

His aunt’s face twisted. “Honey, Josh…” she hesitated, bringing her index finger up to chew on the nail. “He went missing from the accident site. He was never found, presumed dead or abducted. They stopped looking after a few months.”

The words washed over Jensen, painting him with self-recrimination, and he was hardly aware of moving, his legs acting off their accord, carrying him to the bathroom where he locked himself in a stall and promptly threw up the meager contents of his stomach.

They stopped looking after a few months.

He hadn’t even tried to look. He was a baby, sure, but he didn’t even remember his big brother, the boy who he somehow had no doubt, had been the awesome big brother he always dreamed of having. He hadn’t remembered, hadn’t even…hadn’t tried…hadn’t…

Shuddering a breath, Jensen fought tears as he pulled himself gingerly to his feet, flushing the toilet and weakly fumbling with the lock mechanism. He shoved his hand through his hair, panting with the force of his repressed sobs.

His boyfriend gently maneuvered him to the sink and he hunched over, welcoming the cool water in his rancid mouth. He swirled the water around his mouth before spitting it back out, and repeating the process until all he could taste was the metallic water. Jared’s arm remained around his waist through the whole process, and the Alpha didn’t stem his stream of mindless comforts. This time, Jensen didn’t feel deserving of the reassurances.

“Don’t,” he choked harshly, wrenching away from Jared’s grasp. He hated himself even more for hurting his boyfriend, but why was Jared trying to pretend like what he did was okay?

“Jen…”

“I didn’t even remember him, let alone look for him, Jared!” Jensen snapped, tears swimming in his eyes. “He could be hurt, or stuck in some crime ring, or worse, and I’ve left him alone for 16 years because I thought I had a vivid imagination! What kind of a brother am I?”

“The kind who was too little to do anything about an unfortunate circumstance,” Jared answered readily.

“Bullshit,” Jensen snorted derisively. “I’m nothing but a…”

“Don’t. Don’t finish that sentence,” Jared warned quietly, and for the first time, Jensen saw a flash of the Alpha Wolf he was mated to. “You listen to me,” the normally-playful boy intoned seriously, coming forward to rest his palms against Jensen’s hips. “I don’t want to hear you putting yourself down again, and I don’t want to hear you blaming yourself. You were a kid, and it wasn’t your fault that you forgot him. It wasn’t your fault, Jen, it wasn’t. Trust me, baby.” Jared inclined his head, infinitely gentler, and nuzzled Jensen’s neck. “Not your fault. Just bad luck and circumstance.”

Crumbling, Jensen huddled into the comfort of his boyfriend’s arms. “I want to find him, Jay,” he whimpered plaintively, his mind bombarding him with nightmarish scenarios. “I need to find him, I have to find my brother.”

Jared pulled free, replacing his chest against Jensen’s cheek by cradling the green-eyed boy’s face in his big palms. “Are you sure you want to, Jen?” he asked hesitantly, doubts creeping into his expression. “You might not like what you find.”

Abruptly, Jensen jerked away, as if Jared had struck him. “Of course I’m sure,” he answered hardly. “Good or bad, no matter what I find, I’m not letting my brother spend any longer alone than is absolutely necessary.”

Jensen knew his boyfriend was just trying to be pragmatic, but his heart refused to listen to logic.

“You don’t really even know him, Jen,” Jared pointed out, annoyingly calmly. “What if he wants to hurt you?”

“He went looking for me, Jared,” Jensen interrupted, his frayed emotions getting the better of him.

His boyfriend bristled, and Jensen knew that the Alpha’s temper was rearing just as much. “Right, Jensen,” he nodded sarcastically, “because people never look for someone they want to hurt, they just wait for their target to come to them.”

“Why?” Jensen asked challengingly, crossing his arms over his chest. “Why would he? After all
“You don’t even remember him, Jensen!” Jared flung the words out carelessly, and Jensen winced at the reminder, the self-reproach coming back ten-fold. “You would never have remembered him either,” Jared continued ruthlessly, “so why are you so ready to forget common sense and charge after a shadow?”

Hurt resonated in Jensen at his boyfriend’s cavalier attitude towards him. “Why are you so ready to push me into giving up?” he asked stonily, masking his hurt behind anger. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid,” Jared denied hotly. “But how exactly are you going to handle it if he wants you to leave with him, huh? You’re gonna uproot your entire life out of obligation for someone who you don’t even know?”

“I never got a chance to know him, Jared!” Jensen snapped in frustration, a headache blooming behind his eyes. “And I want that chance now, I don’t care how selfish and bratty you’re going to act about it!”

“So you don’t give a damn what I think?” Jared asked rhetorically, hurt and anger radiating off him. “That’s great, Jensen, then why don’t you just go ahead and do whatever the hell you want?”

Jensen recoiled at the tone and the harsh words, tears springing to his eyes. “Fine,” he choked, wrapping an arm around himself. “If that’s the way you want to do this.”

He pushed past Jared, fighting tears. Patting his pocket, he was relieved to note that he had remembered to bring his wallet.

He left the diner before Jared could come back out, not even telling his aunt, running to the nearest bus station in an effort to get out before Jared tried to persuade him back to the truck. Still overly cautious, he got on and rode until he was two towns over from home, before catching another bus and getting off at Chris’ neighborhood.

Reassured that no one had followed him, Jensen trudged to his best friend’s place, groaning when he saw Jared’s truck parked in the driveway. Much as he didn’t want to talk to his boyfriend just yet, he’d promised Chris he’d come around and give him a report, and he was already so late after his diversionary tactics that he knew the other boy would be worried by now.

Breathing deeply in, Jensen opened the door. “Chris?” he called out, his voice rough from crying and lack of use. The blue-eyed boy appeared in the hallway, a relieved look on his face.

Then, somehow, all hell broke loose.

In a split second, that look of relief faded from Chris’ face, to be replaced with a terrified and furious one. Before Jensen could register much more than the abrupt change, Chris snarled, and dropped to his knees, clothes shredding as he shifted into a massive coppery-brown wolf.

Fear licked at Jensen’s insides, and with grave certainty, he knew that his friend was about to attack him.

~*Jared*~
Anxiety and remorse battled with frustration and hurt in Jared’s heart as he drove back home. He’d followed Jensen to the station, in time to see the bus pull away, and he figured that his mate would just be more annoyed if he pulled him off the bus and dragged him to the truck.

He hated fighting with Jensen. They were both frustrated, and had taken it out on each other, but Jared could admit that he hadn’t picked the right time to push, just as Jensen could have at least heard his concerns.

He headed straight to Chris’ house, knowing that Jensen had promised to update his best friend, and come hell or high water- or Jared- that was what Jensen was going to do. The other alpha opened the door, narrowing his eyes when he searched around and couldn’t see Jensen.

“What did you do this time?” Chris asked, by way of greeting, waving him into the house.

“Why is it always my fault?” Jared grumbled. Chris shrugged casually.

“I like Jensen better,” he replied matter-of-factly. “And you generally put your foot in your mouth.”

All good points.

“Josh, the not-so-imaginary big brother, is legit,” Jared told the other wolf, sitting down heavily.

“Damnit.” Chris winced. “That must have killed Jensen.”

Jared flashed back to the feeling he had when his mate was locked in that bathroom stall, retching over and above his guilt-ridden tears. Pain clenched his heart. “Yeah,” he nodded, feeling guilty all over again for pushing his mate at the worst possible times. “He took it pretty bad. Then we kind of fought about whether or not this Josh character should be found.”

“Why wouldn’t you want him to find the guy?” Chris asked, genuinely puzzled.

“What if he wants to hurt Jen?” Jared asked, his irritation flaring before his mind settled on his real fear. “What if he wants to take him away?”

“Ah.” Chris’ face softened with understanding. “You’re afraid Jensen will want to leave.”

“You aren’t?” Jared bolted up, beginning to pace the other wolf’s living room. “It’s his family, Chris, the only real blood family he has left. Who’s to say he won’t leave us, out of obligation if nothing else?”

Chris seemed to ponder his answer, looking unperturbed. “He’s Jensen,” he responded finally. “I trust him with my life. He’s said more times than I can count, that we’re his family, because family don’t end with blood. I trust that he’ll never leave us, because family never leaves each other.”

“That’s my point.”

“Josh isn’t family yet,” Chris shrugged. “If he becomes family, then we’ll deal with that. But more than anything, Jensen is your mate. You know as well as I do that he’ll never leave you. This thing with Josh…” Chris hesitated, searching for words, “Jensen needs something concrete right now. He thought he lost his entire family…but Josh looking for him means he has something left of where he came from. He needs to have that, needs to find that. It’s like finding where he belongs.”

“He belongs with me,” Jared said hardly, daring him to contradict.

“With all of us,” Chris corrected firmly. “Jensen’s integrated himself into half the pack already. And
he did that because he loves you, so once again; why would he leave?” Jared sagged under the scrutiny of the other wolf.

“What if it’s different for a human mate, Chris?” Jared asked uncertainly. “What if he can fall out of love with me?” The possibility haunted Jared in his nightmares, the issue playing on his mind more than he cared to admit.

Chris laughed. “Are you kidding me? Jensen loves you so much that he turned down a scholarship to an art program two weeks ago, because it would have meant a month away from you, and he would have missed your football games.” Jared’s eyes widened at the new found knowledge, feeling simultaneously guilty and touched. “Before you think that,” Chris added warningly, “he doesn’t hold anything against you, especially seeing as how you didn’t even know about it. My point is that he would give up something he loves, because he loves being with you more. He couldn’t fall out of love with you if you both tried.”

Jared felt chagrined at his insecurities as he realized how unfounded they were. Guilt crept up on him, and he rubbed the back of his hair sheepishly. “I’m an idiot, huh?”

“This is why we all blame you first,” Chris deadpanned with a nod. “Wait here. Jensen will come around and you can grovel then.”

Jared grinned in thanks, bringing up Chris’ upcoming gig at the new club. He was surprised to find out that the other alpha was nervous, although it was obvious that he felt better knowing Jensen was going to sing with him.

They chatted amicably, but as time wore on, they both became increasingly nervous. Jensen was later than they expected, and Jared’s mind began to picture the worst case scenarios the longer he was kept in the dark. He cursed his temper for getting them into this situation, and checked his watch every five minutes…

...until the blessed sound of the door opening.

“Chris?” his mate’s voice was thick from tears, and Jared’s heart squeezed in pain. Kane shot him a narrow-eyed look before getting up, Jared following behind.

There was no way for him to have even remotely suspected what was about to happen.

Without any provocation, Jared saw Chris shift, and his heart stopped in his chest when he watched the copper wolf charge his mate. Jensen reared back, and Jared felt the phantom fear through their mating bond, and it was that tightening in his chest, and Jensen’s shout of his name that sprung him from his shocked inaction.

He yanked off his jeans and shirt, and fluidly shifted, running to where Chris now had Jensen pinned, heart racing at the way Chris was snapping his jaws, the intent to harm clear.

“Jared!” the call prompted him to run faster, homicidal Alpha rage coursing through his veins at the pain in his mate’s voice. He threw himself, tackling Chris’ from the side and forcing the other alpha away from his mate. They tumbled a little ways, before Jared sprung back up, quickly putting himself in front of Jensen and growling menacingly, almost daring the other wolf to so much as step closer to his mate. It was only the urge to protect his mate that overrode the instinct to kill any threat to Jensen.

Get yourself together Chris! He snarled viciously, snapping his teeth warningly. Snap out of it! Shift! He infused his voice with the deep timbre of Alpha command, and Chris struggled under its
influence.

“Jared, don’t hurt him,” Jensen pleaded from behind him, scrambling to his feet. “Chris…”

Jared dug his heels in when Jensen tried to walk past him, towards the other alpha. Please Jen, don’t, he mindspoke to his mate, urging him. Dammit don’t. He was going to…

“I know,” Jensen’s hand landed on his fur, and almost immediately, his bloodlust calmed. “Jay, please…he’s my best friend and my brother. There has to be a reason for this, I need to help him.”

No. Jared refused to budge. I can’t let him hurt you, I won’t. If he shifts, then we can move closer.

Jensen sighed behind him, and while he could feel his mate’s exasperation, he also knew that the green-eyed boy did everything to appease his protectiveness, and despite his words, Jensen was still deeply shaken. As much as he wanted to help his friend, Jared knew that he would listen, and he tried to reflect his love and gratitude over their mating bond.

“Chris,” Jensen tried again, from behind him. “Chris, come on, it’s just me. It’s just Jensen. It’s okay, whatever you think is going on, it’s okay. I’m here, and you’re safe, okay? You’re safe, big brother. Come on, calm down…” Jensen continued his slew of calming words, and miraculously, they worked better on Chris than Jared’s Alpha command. The other wolf calmed down gradually, finally coming back to himself, and watching it, Jared compared it to coming back into your own skin after being possessed. Which wasn’t far off the mark, since Chris had definitely not been himself.

Chris sagged with a whimper, looking lost as he sought out Jensen.

“Please, Jay,” Jensen pleaded behind him, sounding wrecked. “Let me…”

I’m coming with, Jared stipulated, and together, they moved to the copper-colored wolf, hunched in on himself now. Jensen kneeled next to his best friend’s form, running his hands through Chris’ fur soothingly.

“That’s it, Chris, there you go,” he murmured encouragingly. “I’m here, I’ve got you…can you shift for me, Chris? Please, buddy, come on.”

With another small sound of pain, Chris shifted, and Jensen immediately slipped out of his shirt and offered it to his best friend. It surprised them both when Chris recoiled from the item.

“No!” he barked, looking as though he were in intense pain. “That’s the…the smell, Jensen, God…” Chris groaned. “Get it away from me, that smell…it’s making me crazy.”

Jared sniffed the air, confused. He didn’t smell anything out of the ordinary…just leather, an underlying vanilla scent, and then the scent that was purely his mate. Although he was confused, Jensen reacted far quicker than him, balling up his shirt and throwing it far away.

“Is that better?” he asked gently, and Chris relaxed a little.

“Marginally,” he managed to get out. “Jensen…”

“Hold on, Chris,” Jensen mumbled, backing away from them. “Just give me two mintues, okay, buddy?”

Chris nodded jerkily, and Jared wondered whether it was safe for him to shift back as yet. “I won’t hurt him,” Chris pushed the words out, as though he were reading his mind. “You can…can shift back.”
Jared hesitated for a second, the urge to be paranoid with his mate’s safety overwhelming him, but finally, he shifted back to his human form, grabbing his jeans from the lawn where he’d chucked it off and pulling it over his legs. Before he could pick up his t-shirt and offer it to the other boy, Jensen ran out of the house, soaking wet and clad in only one of Chris’ towels, carrying the other boy’s jeans and a fresh shirt in his hands. Jared fought the urge to growl at his mate’s state of undress, and likely sensing his possessiveness, Jensen quickly strode to him, giving Chris the privacy to change and at the same time, taking Jared’s shirt and slipping into it.

Which, you know, more than appeased his possessive Alpha.

The t-shirt, slightly baggy on Jared, drowned his mate, coming to rest halfway up his thigh. He made an odd- but no less sexy- picture, dwarfed in Jared’s shirt and the black towel still wrapped around his waist, but nonetheless, Jared’s Alpha hummed in appreciation.

Dropping to his knees next to his best friend, Jensen moved without preamble, gathering Chris in a hug. Jared was still half-surprised when the alpha melted into his mate, clinging on to him and burying closer, seeking comfort in a way he’d never known the other wolf to do.

Now, Jared may not have been able to read his mate’s mind outside of his wolf form, but he’d learnt first, to read Jensen’s eyes. There was no mistaking the unspoken plea now, and seeing Chris so vulnerable, Jared wasn’t worried that he would attack, so he consented to leaving them alone.

Heading inside Chris’ house to try and find something hot and calming to make for the other boy, the way his mom sometimes did, Jared wondered what the hell just happened.

There was no way this was a freak accident.

~*Jensen*~

“Shh, hey, it’s okay Chris,” Jensen murmured, holding his best friend tightly to him. “It’s alright, I got you big brother.”

He spared a moment to roll his eyes inwardly, for conforming to the idea that Chris was the bigger brother, but he was quickly distracted by Chris’ still-shaking form.

Jensen hadn’t known what to expect- had reacted instinctively and dropped to his knees next to his best friend- but he was glad when the other boy burrowed into his arms. It reassured him that Chris’ reaction hadn’t been to him, but to whatever he had smelled on Jensen. Maybe something he was allergic to? Filing away his speculations for a better time, Jensen held on tighter, keeping up his litany of reassurances until Chris slumped in his arms, not clinging as fiercely as before.

“I’m sorry, Jensen,” Chris mumbled, sounding devastated. “I’m so sorry, little brother. I can’t believe I tried to… I could have…”

“It wasn’t you,” Jensen whispered soothingly, his hand moving up to cradle the back of Chris’ neck. “Something happened… we’re gonna figure out what, okay, but until we do, don’t go blaming yourself. You hear me?”

Chris nodded tiredly, seeking refuge a few minutes longer in the crook of Jensen’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, Chris,” Jensen mumbled once more, promise in his voice. “We’re gonna work this out,
okay? We’ll figure it out.”

###

By the time he’d calmed Chris down, his best friend was exhausted, and getting help from Jared, they carefully moved him to the bedroom, where he was out like a light as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Jared left the room as Jensen took care to cover his friend in a warm blanket and take his jeans off, leaving him in boxers and his shirt. Jensen couldn’t control his mother henning, and he gave into his urge to fluff up the pillows before joining Jared in the living room.

His boyfriend immediately swept him up into a massive hug, and Jensen huddled into it, the fear from earlier pounding into him and making him dizzy with its wave of subsequent relief. If Jared hadn’t been here…if he hadn’t come looking for Jensen after he had a temper tantrum and stormed off…

“I got you, baby, I got you,” Jared murmured soothingly, and Jensen realized he’d begun shaking. “I’ll always be there, Jen, I’ll always protect you, I promise.”

Locking his fingers behind Jared’s back, he nuzzled his face into his boyfriend’s bare chest. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, remorse settling in his heart. “I’m sorry, Jay, I never should have said those things to you. I do care about what you think. Your opinion means the world to me, and I never meant to make you think that. I didn’t mean it.”

“I know, baby,” Jared mumbled, leaning down to cover his neck and shoulder in kisses. “I’m sorry too. I was so inconsiderate, I let my stupid insecurities get in the way of what you needed.”

Realization of Jared’s real fear dawned on him, and his heart warmed. Balancing on the tips of his toes, he kissed Jared languidly, tracing the seam of the taller boy’s lips to deepen it. He pressed closer to Jared’s warm, firm body as he explored his mate’s mouth, drawing blissful sounds from the other boy.

“Never,” he whispered against his lover’s lips when they finally broke for air. “I’ll never leave you, Jay. Finding my brother will not make me forget the family I have. I promise.” He kissed Jared chastely, once, twice, three times. “I would never leave you, Jay. How could I, when we’re already planning our lives together?” he grinned teasingly, heart skipping at the dimples that popped up in Jared’s cheeks. They never failed to make his heart skip a beat. “I don’t have a key to a house to offer you. But even so, the only thing that I’m sure about in my future, is you being in it.”

Jared jerked his head in a nod, keeping their foreheads pressed together. “Me too, Jen. I love you so much…and I’m going to do everything I can to help you find your brother.”

“No,” Jensen shook his head, heart hurting at the decision he was making, but knowing his priorities nonetheless. “I don’t know anything about my brother. There’s nothing I can do about Josh but let him find me. Chris on the other hand…” he swallowed hard. “Whatever just happened? That was no freak thing. We solve that first, we figure that out…then we can try looking for Josh again. Chris is the priority right now, nothing gets to come in the way of this.”

Jared smiled, infinite softness in his eyes. “I love you, Jensen Ackles.” Then, as if he knew all Jensen’s insecurities before even he did, he wrapped Jensen up in his arms, and whispered tenderly. “You belong with me, love. Right here, in my arms. Forever.”

Swallowing, Jensen lost himself in the feel of strong arms, and a love vaster than the oceans and
fiercer than a Titan’s rage.

“I love you back, Jay. There’s nowhere else I would ever want to be.”

###

Chapter End Notes

More questions than answers, I know! But now the action really begins...;-)

Please remember to check out that new story of mine that I’m about to post! Hope you guys will like it!

Much love! -JayGirl
Amazed

Chapter Notes

None of the songs mentioned belong to me!

I apologize for how short this chapter is, but I'm having such a difficult time lately, bringing Josh in! Just a small filler for you guys, until I can get my drama in order!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

“What in the name of all things sacred makes people think that an eighteen-and-under club—emphasizing eighteen-and-under, here! – would serve Bud or Jell-O shots?”

Jared grinned as his frustrated mate flopped on to the empty seat next to him. It was the first time that entire day that Jensen had sat down, and Jared wrapped an arm around him in sympathy, feeling the phantom twinge of exhaustion over their bond. He licked quickly at the sensitive spot on the underside of his mate’s jaw.

“Sorry, baby,” he nudged the bone-tired boy playfully with his nose, “but on the plus side, it’s only tonight that you’re gonna have to deal with people on the floor.”

“True.” Jensen nodded briefly, considering his words. “Remind me to thank Benny for asking me to manage the running of the place and not it’s functioning. Honestly, Garth is so much more suited to that,” he flicked his head at the long-haired, overly enthusiastic man who was engaged in what looked to be an intense discussion with a tall girl in glasses. Jensen pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, worrying the already-swollen flesh between his incisors. “Although, I’ve seriously gotta give him a talk about personal boundaries and the grounds on which people can serve sexual harassment charges.”

Jared barked a laugh, not even trying to maintain his empathy when it came to the far-too-bubbly, gangly guy. Jensen shoved weakly at him and the Alpha caught the flailing arm, concern once again sweeping over him as he noted the deeper rings that framed Jensen’s stunning green orbs.

Between trying to find out what had happened to Chris, getting tonight’s club launch ready, helping Chris practice his sets for his first performance, tutoring Megan in Chem during Jared’s football practice and keeping up with his own work, the pack Alpha knew that his mate was running himself ragged. Jensen had passed ‘burnt-out’ a couple towns back, and Jared resolved to get him to take the day off tomorrow.

“At least Soph will be thanking me by the end of the night.” Jensen’s smirking voice drew Jared from his careful observations. The wolf turned his attention to the front table, where the brunette beta was watching Chris with star-struck eyes.

Not to imply that Kane wasn’t returning the doe-eyed look to a fervent degree.

“They were hopeless trying to stay away from each other,” Jensen concluded resolutely. “I may not
be a Were, but I’m enough your mate to know that no amount of will-power would have been enough.”

Unease built up in Jared, and he tried to hide behind a smile. The last thing he wanted to do was spoil Jensen’s evening- the evening he had worked so tirelessly on- by pointing out the problems his father was likely to have with accepting Sophia as pack.

“What’s the matter, Jay?” Shrewd green eyes assessed him, sharp even as they were clouded over in exhaustion.

“Noth-,” he tried to deny immediately, stopping himself short when his tired, irritable boyfriend shot him a baleful glare as if to say, Nice fucking try. Now spill, I’m too tired to kick your ass.

Sighing, Jared drummed his fingers against the wooden table, flushing as he tried to work up the gall to look his mate in the eyes.

“…Jensen Ackles!”

Their attention was diverted by Kane’s delighted voice, and Jared slumped with relief at the interruption. Jensen raised an eyebrow in warning, but Jared only grinned in response, electing to ignore the reality that his mate was not going to let the question go unanswered.

“What?” Jen grumbled loudly, glaring at Chris, too tired to even stand up. A couple people in the crowd chuckled in sympathy.

“I believe,” Chris grinned devilishly, “that you promised to sing with me tonight, little brother.”

The reaction was instantaneous. The crowd cheered, cat calls and whistles and shouts permeating the air, and Jensen’s face whitened dramatically. Kane began to walk towards them, and tiredness aside, Jensen shot up from his chair, taking refuge behind Jared’s chair.

“Aw, come on,” Jensen whined, his fingers digging into Jared’s shoulder, setting off his protective instincts despite the ridiculousness of the situation.

“Don’t wanna hear it, freckles,” Chris crowed, lowering his mike to speak to them. “Get your ass up there, and Jared, don’t you even dare try getting all protective pack Alpha on me.”

Jared peered up at his mate, who seemed to be grasping at straws. “I’ll make you a deal,” he offered suddenly, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “You sing to Sophia, exactly what’s in your heart… and I’ll get up there and do the same for Jared.”

Finally, a wager he was interested in.

Jared’s ears twitched as he sat up straighter, fighting the urge to command Kane to take the bet. Jared wasn’t an insecure bastard, not by any standard, but that didn’t mean that he wouldn’t enjoy being told how his mate felt. Wouldn’t enjoy being reassured that he felt every bit as much as Jared did. And he had been dying to hear Jensen sing, so with those two temptations on the line, it was a lethal combination.

“I vote yes,” the Alpha piped up with a sly grin, chuckling at the betrayed, dirty look his pack-mate shot him.

“Jared’s Alpha, what he says, goes,” Jensen promptly declared, seeming comfortable in his victory.

What the green-eyed boy hadn’t counted on, was Chris’ steely resolve.
Turning on his heel, the hard-headed alpha strode back on to the stage and whispered something to his bandmates. “This one is dedicated to the girl I’ve loved from afar, as far back as I can remember,” he announced boldly into the mike. The bashful smile he sent to a blushing Sophia was an adorable contradiction to his on-stage presence. A fast-paced guitar riff started the song off, and Jared smiled at the country feel of the opening notes. Chris sent Jensen a cheeky grin, before refocusing his attention.

“Girl, I’ve been thinking about us,  
And you know I aint good at this stuff!  
But these feelings piling up won’t give me no rest.”

Jared barked out a laugh with Jensen; they seemed to have recognized the tune at the same moment, as Blake Shelton’s *Honeybee*. It was one of Jensen’s favorites, Jared knew, and the track had grown on him since he’d heard it.

The crowd started clapping with the beat, some people dragging partners on to the floor to dance, and Sophia was grinning from ear to ear, hand over heart, tears shimmering in her eyes.

And in that moment, Jared realized why his mate was willing to push their bond despite the consequences.

Seeing two mates find each other like that, was awesome to witness, especially knowing he was lucky enough to have the same feelings every time he looked at Jensen. It was something worthy of protecting…and also something he didn’t have to worry about just yet.

Grabbing Jensen’s hands between his own, he led his now-laughing boyfriend on to the dance floor, pulling him into his chest. Wrapping an arm around his waist and trying to forget how sexy it was that one arm could span his mate’s entire middle, Jared began to move them to the beat in a haphazard dance that had most people giggling and fawning over them fondly. Jared wasn’t surprised by their reaction, since the town was more or less a hub for LGBT supporters, but Jensen seemed shy, hiding his face in Jared’s broad chest.

Nothing to complain about.

“You be my sugar, baby,  
And I’ll be your sweet iced tea!  
You be my honeysuckle,  
And I’ll be your honeybee!  
Oh-h-h, I’ll be your honeybee.”

The club burst into applause as Chris trailed off, and Sophia downright ran to him, throwing herself into his arms. It was heart-warming to behold, as was the beaming smile that almost seemed to wipe the exhaustion off his mate’s features.

Over Sophia’s shoulder, Chris’ blue eyes sought out Jensen’s, and it surprised Jared to still feel a modicum of jealousy, even if it was easily dispatched. As soon as the friends’ eyes met, Chris mouthed a silent ‘thank you’, his overwhelming happiness and love etched on his normally-stoic face.

Jared tactfully pretended not to notice the few stray tears that Jensen swiped quickly away.

“I owe you, freckles,” Chris spoke into his microphone, tucking Sophia into the curve of his body as he addressed everyone again. “But…a bet is a bet!”
A force of nervousness so staggering that it almost made him dizzy, came across their mating bond. Instantly, the Alpha had his arms around his boyfriend. “Jen?” he breathed as he pulled Jensen in close. “You okay?”

His trembling bundle didn’t answer. Simply pressed himself closer for a few seconds, crushing his arms around Jared, before wrenching himself away.

“A bet is a bet,” he mumbled, ashen, and Jared felt some measure of relief at the problem being a case of stage-fright.

Jared nuzzled his boyfriend’s neck, ignoring the various responses from the cooing crowd, focused instead on the shivers racking his lithe frame. “You don’t have to, Jen,” he soothed, pushing down his pang of disappointment. “Chris won’t be mad.”

Pride straightened Jensen’s back, although the nerves didn’t stave. “No.” His mate shook his head. “I made the bet, I’ll honor my end.”

Iron determination mingled with the scent of doubts and self-consciousness. Jensen’s stride didn’t falter as he made his way to the stage, and Jared, if nothing else, admired his unrestrained courage.

Taking the mike and shooting Chris a glare, Jensen cleared his throat, waiting for the crowd to die down. “Hi,” he greeted nervously, giving a small half-wave. “I’m Jensen. The uh…the bet Chris is talking about…I was supposed to sing to my boyfriend,” Jared’s Alpha hummed happily when Jensen pointed him out, enjoying the acknowledgment of Jensen as his, “if Chris sang to the girl he loved, Sophia Bush.” Jensen jerked his head at the cuddling couple before bringing his eyes back to Jared.

Emotion filled the green depths. “I don’t speak of what’s in my heart very easily. And I was okay with that before, because frankly, words? They just don’t do justice to the way I feel about Jared. There isn’t enough of them, they aren’t strong enough, they aren’t tangible enough.” Jensen shook his head ruefully, and Jared’s eyes filled with his own tears of happiness. Singing aside, that statement, was more than enough for him. “I don’t think words will ever be able to encompass everything I feel for him, but I’m going to try.”

Taking a deep breath, Jensen covered the microphone and whispered something to the band. They nodded, and promptly, soft notes filled the air, so different to Chris’ song. The melody was sweet and heartfelt, and Jared immediately fell under its spell.

“Every time our eyes meet.  
This feeling inside me?  
Is almost more than I can take.”

Jared didn’t recognize the words, but then, at that very moment, he wouldn’t have been able to remember his own name.

His mate was amazing.

Jensen’s low, honeysuckle drawl sent shivers down Jared’s spine. It was smooth and sweet, captivating him, and so full of feeling that he had every breathing body in the room gazing at him in awe and reverence. Even Garth had stopped talking long enough to listen to the angelic voice that was streaming from his lover’s perfect lips. Long eyelashes rested on his cheeks as he sang, eyes closed against the crowd, but Jared felt every word caress him like Jensen’s own hand.
“Baby, when you touch me?
I can feel how much you love me.
And it just blows me away.

I’ve never been this close to anyone, or anything.
I can hear your thoughts…and I can feel your dreams.

I don’t know how you do what you do,
I’m so in love with you.
It just keeps getting better…

I wanna spend the rest of my life
With you by my side.
forever and ever.

Every little thing that you do…
Baby I’m amazed by you.”


And reciprocated, Jared thought, wiping tears from his eyes. Always reciprocated.

~*Jensen*~

“Every little thing that you do-o..
Baby I’m amazed…by…you-u-u.”

Jensen let his voice hold the last note, a rough crooning that accompanied the slow rhythm of the song he felt was written for the long-haired Alpha of his dreams.

He finally opened his eyes, and the club was silent. He cringed in embarrassment, eyes searching out Jared, eager to get away from the crowd he’d made a fool of himself in front of. He finally found the hazel eyes that always brought him comfort, only to find them filled with moisture. Jared was… crying?

Abruptly, the silence in the club was broken, as deafening cheers descended over the room. Jensen was dumbstruck at the reaction, rooted to the spot as catcalls, whistles, cheers and even a few sniffles echoed around him. The only reaction he was concerned about, however, was Jared’s.

His lover was making his way through the unruly crowd, and Jensen was inspired into motion, eager to meet Jared halfway. He pushed past his uncertainty, tingling deep in his palms and in the balls of his feet the closer he came to Jared. He barely noticed the rough congratulatory pats to his shoulder and the people briefly pulling him into a two-second hug; all his attention was on his boyfriend, and he felt no qualms showing it, even though he wasn’t big into public displays of affection.

The tall, broad-shouldered Alpha caught him up against his chest, crushing their lips together in a possessive kiss that spoke more about how he felt about Jensen’s performance than any amount of words could have. Warmth filled his insides, making his head spin.

“Fucker! Just had to show me up!” The chuckle came from behind him, and despite the words, Jensen heard nothing but affection from his best friend. “I thought you said you couldn’t sing!”
“I said I didn’t think I was any good,” Jensen corrected as soon as he got his breath back. He snuggled into Jared’s side. “I still don’t think so, but apparently, y’all do.”

“So you’re tone-deaf then, Jen-Ster?” Soph grinned at him. “You’re a real success story.” Jensen swallowed his retaliation, knowing all too well the irrational protective steak of alphas over their mates. He focused his energy on his own alpha, who was gazing adoringly down at him.

“Now you know.” He stated simply, softly. Jared beamed at him, bending down to press a tender kiss to the seam of his lips. Before they could go any further, and this was probably for the best because he was quickly becoming lost in sensation, the calls and encouragements of the crowd became too much to ignore. Like a whirlwind of activity, Jensen found himself back on stage with Chris next to him, and they were launching into Chris’ second set for the night, one Jensen knew as well as his partner, since he’d been helping Chris practice all week.

The hours passed easily, and by the time Jensen got off stage, his throat was parched and his head was ringing, but he was grinning madly. He snuggled on to Jared’s lap, gulping down a glass of ice water and taking refuge in the cage of the Alpha’s arms.

“Jen-ster, I owe you a car for getting me together with that specimen of amazingness.” Sophia was glowing as she gazed at Chris, still performing, and a grin stretched over Jensen’s face. He was happy to see his friends find happiness, and even though he knew the Romeo-and-Juliet-esque problems it could incur, he didn’t really care. If there was anything he’d learnt, it was that love this strong, was always worth fighting for. Jared being the perfect example of that.

Before he could lean over and impulsively kiss the reason for his smile, he heard a voice over the sound of Chris’ singing.

“Jen-SEN! We got a supplier on the phone!”

Sighing in resignation- it seemed his feet were not getting spared this night- he hauled himself up, returning Jared’s sympathetic hand-squeeze with a weary smile. He trudged to the bar set-up they had, a touch he’d implemented to give the place a more realistic feel, and grabbed the phone.

“This is Jensen Ackles,” he answered the phone, making his voice professional in spite of how tired he was. “How can I help you?”

“You’ve been looking for Joshua Ackles.”

The rough, unfamiliar voice sent chills down Jensen’s spine, but it was nothing compared to the barrage of feelings that assaulted him when he registered the words. Immediately, his mind began drawing p horrific scenarios.

“Who is this?” he demanded gruffly, clenching his teeth. Drawing on a strength he wasn’t aware he possessed, he shoved his growing nausea and the roaring in his ears down, trying to focus on the tinny voice coming through the speaker instead.

“Come outside to the back parking lot- alone- if you’re still interested,” the voice commanded, before the harsh sound of a dead line reverberated back into Jensen’s ear.

“Fuck!” he cursed violently, slamming his fist against the counter. A few of the people around shot him looks that varied from concerned to mildly nervous, but he couldn’t focus in on one of them long enough to muster up some reassurance that he was okay, and not at all crazy.
Although, at the present time, he was definitely not okay, and he felt pretty close to the extremity of crazy.

He briefly considered calling out for Jared, knowing that his lover would hear him, but if the situation were dangerous, did he really want the love of his life to be involved? Jared had tried to warn him that there could be danger involved in tracking down his brother, but Jensen hadn’t really considered the very real likelihood until just then.

And he had to ask himself the question: was Jared’s safety worth it to put on the line, if it meant some answers?

His answer was prompt and unwavering; not a million years.

There was nothing worth compromising Jared over, so there was no other choice but to leave him out of this. Unfortunately for Jensen, his insatiable curiosity meant that he had to go looking for answers, especially when it came to this, and that meant, at that moment, going outside to that parking lot.

Without telling Jared.

Some part of him screamed that he was making an illogical and awful decision, but how could he bear to put Jared in harm’s way? Before he could talk himself out of it, Jensen summoned Garth.

“I need you to do me a favor,” he told the gangly man solemnly. Maybe it was the tone of his voice, or something Garth saw in his eyes, but the man stopped his talking for the first time that evening, returning a firm nod in answer instead. A strange sense of gratitude and loyalty fell over Jensen, a healthy measure of respect mixed in there. “If I’m not back in 10 minutes, I need you to go to my boyfriend over there, Jared?” Garth quickly nodded to show his recognition. “I need you to tell him there’s family trouble and that he needs to find me ASAP. Okay? Can you do that for me, Garth?”

“Yeah,” the other man nodded soberly, his Southern twang resonating in the air. “I can do that, boss.”

“Good man,” Jensen murmured absently, clapping him on the shoulder before turning around to steal another glance at his lover.

Jared was laughing at something Sophia had said, and Jensen was glad for a moment, that they were getting along. He hadn’t wanted to the whole gang to come to the opening night for the sole reason that he wanted Jared to bond with Sophia a little, enough so that he could accept the other wolf to some degree, and Jensen was glad to see that his sacrifice hadn’t been in vain. Smiling at the picture, Jensen kept it in his mind as he straightened his back and walked out to the hallway that led to the back entrance.

The parking lot was deserted, a fact not lost to the JR in him. Instinctively, he ghosted his hands over his waistband, starting violently when he felt no tell-tale resistance of his knife.


Hiding his awkwardness behind a mask of collectedness, Jensen roved his gaze over the sea of blues, blacks, reds, yellows, whites and silvers, feeling no better when he couldn’t readily point out an attacker.

And that was when it occurred to him, that despite the situation he found himself in, he felt no instinct to run or defend. Unease, maybe, as though he were about to give a speech at the White House, but not afraid, no.
A loud cluttering broke into his thoughts, and Jensen whirled around in time to see a hooded man running around the corner. His shout died in his throat, and he aborted his first thought to run after the guy; he ran like a professional sprinter, and frankly, a person skulking around the back of a club? Probably not the best person to try and befriend.

The briefest glint of something caught his eye and Jensen’s attention was drawn to a silver knife embedded in the ground. A shiver worked its way down his spine; silver? A wolf hunter, maybe? One on the hunt for Jared?

Turning the blade around his fingers, Jensen managed to catch sight of something scrawled on the handle, working hard to observe in the face of his paranoia over his mate. The letter J woven around an A.

Just exactly the same way he did it on all his paintings and art works.

###

Chapter End Notes

I promise more soon, and I'm bringing the pack in as well as Josh, and some interesting revelations about Aunt Katherine...
The Lone Wolf

Chapter Notes

Thank you all once again for being the most amazing readers you guys are!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

“You want me to do what?”

Dean’s voice was incredulous, clearly more blatant disbelief than question, and Jensen flinched, knowing the gravity of what he was asking his old friend to do. He nodded, even though the security expert couldn’t see it over the phone, a knot in his chest at the fact that he had to ask his friend to do something this risky.

“It’s the only way to find out,” he pointed out helplessly. “I wouldn’t be asking if I had another option, D.”

Winchester sighed heavily, and Jensen could imagine the way the man was probably running a hand down his face, ghosting over his barely-there beard. “You want me to hack into several classified networks to try and find out where this Josh guy has been over the last decade and some. You do realize that my brother is a hot-shot lawyer, right?”

Jensen grinned briefly. “Sam was, and still probably is, nearly as good a hacker as you, so don’t pull that shit on me.” The green-eyed boy’s smile faded and he bit his lip nervously. “I really hate to ask you, D, but I gotta know. Not for any other reason than the fact that he might be a danger to Jared.”

“How?” Dean asked, concern coming over the line as clear as a bell. “Do you need me to come over there? Keep an eye on you two?”

Jensen paused for a moment, considering the option. It would be nice to have someone to fall back on if he wasn’t able to protect Jared…but bringing Dean on board was too much of a risk. Not only did it increase the chances of Jared finding out what he knew, and how he came to know it (because Jensen was not voluntarily gonna tell him that he went out to a deserted parking lot at night, alone) but he also couldn’t risk Jared’s secret like that and in the same vein, he couldn’t put Dean in a position where he might find out, since knowing the secret could hurt him just as much.

“It’s okay,” he refused the offer, “I can handle it. I just don’t want to go in blind. I might be acting paranoid anyway…which is why I need more information.”

The elder Winchester brother sighed heavily. “Kid, you owe me a beer when you’re around here again.”

“You’re the best, D,” Jensen grinned. “And,” he added quickly, “could we keep this…discreet? I don’t want Jared finding out and worrying.”
“Because why would you talk to the guy you think is in danger?” Dean grumbled sarcastically. “Not like it’s any of his Goddamn business.”

Jensen rolled his eyes at the almost paternal disapproval. “Jared doesn’t need to worry about this. Especially if it’s Josh, then that little problem will be mine to fix.”

“Watch your back, kid,” Dean cautioned, unable to disguise his unease. “I’ll be in touch.”

The line died, and Jensen threw his phone on the ground in front of him, one hand reaching up to massage at the knots developing in his neck and shoulders. Letting his head drop forward, he basked in the sunlight that beat down on him, taking measured breaths.

Finding that knife last night had shaken him more than he cared to admit. He had returned inside, much to Garth’s relief, and by sheer force of will, worked the rest of the night until closing. If Jared had noticed his edginess and tension on the way back home, he’d written it off as exhaustion, and had gently persuaded him to take the day off today. The future Pack Alpha had a treaty meeting again, so Jensen quickly decided that now would be his best, if not only, opportunity to try and nip this problem in the bud before Jared caught on to him.

The idea that a wolf-hunter might be after Jared and the pack- and the possibility that said wolf-hunter might be his brother- took a toll on Jensen’s state of mind. All night, he had tossed and turned, eventually getting out of bed at ten after five, showering, and borrowing Eric’s car to come out to his and Jared’s clearing. The beautiful place had lost some of its glimmer without his lover there, and Jensen had continued hiking further west, eventually finding a smaller meadow about 8 miles out. It was there that he’d settled and begun to plot.

Roping Dean into it had been the logical step forward; he didn’t want the wolves involved with this at all, because if he was wrong, he would be putting his brother on their radar, and if he was right, he would lose all control over the investigation and ergo, wouldn’t be equipped to help protect them, Jared and Chris and Chad and the gang, in particular. Dean was the only person outside of his furry friends who had the means to find the information he needed, so it really was a no-brainer. The only downside to all his planning?

Waiting for answers.

Blowing out a gusty sigh, he stretched his sore muscles. Judging by the sun now high up in the sky, he had been in his own world a few hours. It was at least noon by now, but with everything he had to worry over, his appetite had all but disappeared, which was a good thing since his preoccupied mind had forgotten to pack any food with him. Jared would be on his case if he knew Jensen had skipped breakfast and lunch. His mate really needed to…

Snap.

A twig broke, to his left, and Jensen’s thoughts stopped immediately, eyes snapping to the spot where the noise had come from. A tiny wolf cub was cowering there, and from the grass all over it, Jensen deduced that the little one had been watching him, before tripping over the twig and tumbling unceremoniously into the clearing.

The cub was breathtaking, and Jensen’s heart melted at its innocence and beauty. He was visibly shaking in fear, his tiny body shivering as he curled into himself, only his eyes visible between the paws he’d buried his head in.

Slowly, so as not to scare the little thing, Jensen held out an upturned palm, smiling encouragingly at the pup as he slowly raised his muzzle. Waiting patiently until the young wolf was comfortable,
Jensen was rewarded when he bellied slowly across the grass before resting his small muzzle in Jen’s hand.

“You’re a wolf cub, aren’t you?” Jensen commented softly, beginning to lightly stroke the cub’s jaw with his thumb. He hadn’t really expected an answer, so he was delighted when the little one carefully nodded, licking his thumb before settling back into the cradle of Jensen’s palm.

Unable to resist, he scooped the cub into his arms, feeling indefinable warmth burn his insides when the little one nestled into his chest.

“Are you from Jared’s pack?” he asked gently, rocking to and fro as he stroked the cub. “Are you from the Padalecki pack?”

Another approximation of a nod, and another lick.

“Do you know who I am?”

Another nod, another lick.

“Are you out here all alone?”

This time, the cub nipped his palm lightly, an obvious negative, and Jensen laughed at the communication, some of the tension in him draining for the first time since he found that knife. All at once, another two cubs padded hesitantly forward from the spot where their friend had fallen, tails between their legs and ears flattened in what Jensen assumed was apology and nervousness.

“It’s okay, little ones,” he murmured lowly, lovingly. “I’m not mad. You guys aren’t gonna be in trouble, or whatever. What are you doing so far out here? Is this pack lands?”

The cub in his arms licked his palm again, and it seemed his little friend was a lot more comfortable around him now as he got up on his hind legs and rested his paws on Jensen’s chest. He licked playfully at the boy’s cheek, and Jensen laughed at the childlike behavior.

“So you little guys were out exploring, huh?” Jensen chuckled, reaching his free hand out to the other cubs. Satisfied that their friend wasn’t getting eaten or punished in any way, they were a lot faster to trust, and Jensen was quickly surrounded with three playful, energetic wolf cubs. His first friend had already made himself comfortable on Jensen’s shoulder, and since he was the smallest of the three, Jensen decided to let him stay there.

**Crunch.**

Jensen froze as the muted, barely audible sound of leaves being crushed reached his ears. Different this time, unease crept up on him, alerting him to something far more sinister than three curious cubs. Icy fear stopped the blood in his veins and he stood, casting his eyes around in search of the danger that was spiking his instincts. Suddenly, the two pups were behind him, cowering at his legs, and the pup on his shoulder was snuggling into his neck, as if to hide there, also trembling violently.

Something told Jensen that it wasn’t the cubs’ parents.

Protective instincts surged to the surface, and he set the littlest pup next to his friends, so that he could shield all three of them with his body until he could deem things safe.

He had done that just in time, since in the next moment, a massive black wolf leaped into the clearing, giving a short, predatory bark.

In stark contrast to his interactions with any other wolves, Jensen felt sharp terror resonate deep
within him. He knew from the cubs’ whimpers and shivers the wolf wasn’t pack, and therefore wouldn’t hesitate to rip them all to shreds.

And it seemed that that was pretty much the plan.

The wolf stalked slowly forward, almost taunting him, playing with his fear. Jensen kept shielding the cubs with his body, trying to push them with his foot, urging them to run back where they came from. The little ones were frozen with fright, however, and couldn’t do much more than hide behind him. Realizing that, Jensen resolved that whatever might become of him in that moment, he was going to protect those cubs to his dying breath.

The massive wolf was tiring of them now, Jensen’s instincts told him. In one fluid motion, he dropped to the ground and caged all three pups between his chest and the ground, making his torso a sort of shelter that stretched all around the cubs, shielding them entirely from view, and reach. As he dropped, Jensen caught the wolf’s coiling motion in his peripheral vision, so with the little ones safe, he braced himself for the feel of claws and teeth tearing the skin from his back.

He was met instead by the sound of a deep growl, and in an instant, a brown wolf burst through the clearing, tackling the grey wolf to the side. It looked like Jared, and yet…in his heart, Jensen knew it wasn’t. Teeth snapping, the wolves went for each other, clashing magnificently.

Rendered helpless once more, Jensen settled for the only thing he could do; cradled the pups closer still and braced himself, locking his muscles to make it a harder feat to get to the pups.

An agonized howl was cut brutally short, and Jensen knew with cold certainty that the fight was over. Who won, Jensen didn’t dare to check, and after some speculation, he wondered if it would matter, or if the both wolves had the same deadly intent.

He flinched harshly when something cold was suddenly pressed against his forearm.

He tightened his body, still afraid for the cubs, until he realized it was the most delicate touch of a snout. He looked up into the eyes of a black wolf, leaner than the one that had been aiming for their throats, and seemingly more docile as well.

A happy whelp from inside his protective embrace shocked Jensen into letting go, and he was relieved when the pups leaped at the other wolf joyfully, presumably their mother. She nipped their shoulders chidingly, even as she smothered them in licks and affectionate rubs.

Feeling intrusive upon the reunion, Jensen slowly stood, turning around to face the brown wolf that saved their lives. The blood from his muzzle was gone, presumably licked clean, and he regarded Jensen carefully, with clever eyes.

Jensen squirmed, feeling uncomfortably like he was being assessed. He couldn’t hide his relief when the big wolf suddenly lolled his tongue out in the approximation of a grin, seeming to decide that Jensen was okay. Ducking quickly behind the bushes, the guy shifted; by the height, the slanted brown eyes and the floppy hair, several things immediately fell into place for Jensen.

“You must be Jeff Padalecki.”

~*Jared*~
Treaty meetings were the worst.

It wasn’t only being away from Jensen, it was also the undeniable, but frustratingly ignored, fact that they were getting nowhere very fast.

The bottom line was that Jeffery Dean Morgan didn’t want peace. He wanted retribution.

Jared was careful to keep his rant to himself, but he simply couldn’t understand why his father entertained what was an obvious excuse to scope out the Padalecki pack’s alphas. There was no other reason for JD Morgan to keep entertaining the possibility of peaceful co-existence, but it seemed that his father believed firmly in the other Alpha’s bloodline.

Personally, Jared didn’t.

As he was often reminded, however, he was not Pack Alpha yet. Whatever his father ruled in the pack was law, and while that was something Jared resented as much as he respected, it was also something he couldn’t change.

Which was why he was in a treaty meeting when he should have been looking after Jensen.

Jared was pretty sure his mate had made himself sick with exhaustion. By the end of the night, he was pale and on edge, his heart rate accelerated even away from the club. Jared could almost mistake it for nervousness with the occasional tremors that rocked his body. Thankfully, Jen hadn’t put up much of a fight when he suggested taking the day off; just gave a token refusal for the sake of his pride before caving to Jared’s insistence that he needed a break.

Turning his attention back to the meeting, Jared pawed the ground in frustration. They had reached an impasse hours ago, but neither pack Alpha was willing to give an inch to the other, resulting in a stale mate that they all had to endure in silence. Jared caught Chad’s eye just before he could unthinkingly paw the ground again, stopping himself after seeing the warning look in his friend’s eyes.

Don’t, Jay-Pad, Chad cautioned him, your dad seems to be in a foul enough mood already.

Jared bristled at the reprimand, but nodded, seeing the sense in the other alpha’s concerned rebuke. He was careful to sensor his mindspeak to his friend, and not to the entire Padalecki pack. Gotcha. M’just so frustrated, man. I want to go home, I’m worried about Jensen.

Sick? Chad cocked his head ever so slightly at him in worry. Hurt?

Naw, Jared fought the smile that threatened to come on to his otherwise impassive face. Chad and him had perfected this game; they could have a whole conversation with the pack none the wiser. Just plain exhaustion.

That explains the lack of smiling he’s been doing. What's Papa Padalecki’s excuse?

Jeff, Jared snorted inwardly at the nickname his father would kill Chad for using. He called this morning to say he was going to be late and couldn’t make it for the meet. The twins weren’t feeling well and he stayed until they were asleep. Dad’s been mad since then.

Personally, the future Alpha couldn’t fathom why his father was in a sour mood over that. As far as he was concerned, his little nephews came first, and he was proud of Jeff for choosing them over this stupid, irrelevant meet.

I wondered why the Not-Entirely-Too-Prodigal Son was MIA, Chad chuckled.
Speak of the devil…

Before Jared could snark something appropriate back, his older brother’s voice filled his ear, and every other pack members’ too, although Jared didn’t know if a pack-wide broadcast was what he intended.

_Jared!_ The alarm in the elder Padalecki’s voice caught his attention. _I think your mate’s in trouble. I’m about twenty miles north of the treaty site, intercepting a lone wolf attack. Get here, little brother._

Jared was in motion as soon as the word ‘North’ left his brother’s mouth.

Fear pulsed a jagged rhythm through him, ice cold and damn near incapacitating. He could have been moving through Jell-O for the slow progress he was making, and though he knew he wasn’t superhuman, he readily cursed at the world.

The words ‘in trouble’ and ‘lone wolf attack’ played on his mind like a broken record, and flashes of a horror scene filled his mind, spurring him on to move faster still. He knew Chris and Chad were at his heels, could feel the anguish reflected at a fraction of his own, but he could spare no thought to them. All that mattered, was getting to his mate. Panic driving him, he pushed even harder, his paws barely touching the ground by this point, branches flashing past him at a dizzying speed as he ate the distance up.

There were too many emotions coming over their mating bond for Jared to decipher, as he was roiling in his own cacophony of feelings, but Jared knew with cold certainty that his Jen was in trouble, and it was killing him to know that he wasn’t there to protect him. It took a herculean effort to push past all the feelings of overwhelming guilt and anxiety, but Jared somehow managed the feat.

_You think he’s okay._

Jeff’s speculative voice came through to Jared, making him falter in his steps in relief.

_You think?_ Jared growled warningly. _What do you mean, you think?_  

_Cool it, bro,_ Jeff’s annoyingly calm voice triggered Jared’s short fuse.

_Don’t tell me to fucking cool it, Jeff!_  

_I gotta shift,_ Jeff answered absently. _I think he’s freaked out enough with me in my wolf form._

Jared growled, snapping his teeth even though his brother wasn’t there to see it. _I’m there in five minutes._

The closer he got, the more he could feel his mate’s receding terror. It didn’t diminish completely, likely because he was still surrounded by things unfamiliar to him. Focusing only on his soul’s call to Jared’s own, the Alpha ran hard, but still, it felt like an eternity before he finally burst through the clearing.

The first thing he noticed was Jensen, standing with his arms wrapped protectively around himself, muscles coiled and jeans and shirt streaked with dirt. Then he registered his brother, the smell of the dead wolf Jeff had presumably dragged out of sight and Hayley, an omega in their pack with her three cubs.

Jensen recognized his wolf, and relief drowned his features, relaxing his stance and taking the tension from him. Bounding over to him in wolf form, Jared inspected his mate for injuries, his
attention only on his lover.

Jensen, baby, are you okay?

“I’m fine, Jay…I’m okay,” Jensen dropped to his knees and Jared nuzzled him lovingly. The boy’s arms wrapped comfortably around him as Jensen buried his face in Jared’s fur. They stayed like that for a moment, blocking out the rest of the world, Jared constantly licking at Jensen’s exposed neck.

When Chris came forward, Jared instinctively snarled, but the other alpha waited patiently for him to come back to his senses. Kane had shifted at some point, and now he held out a pair of jeans to Jared, even as his attention was solely on his brother, anxiety splashed over his face.

I’m just gonna shift, baby, okay? Jared butted his muzzle against Jensen’s neck, waiting for him to straighten and licking the underside of his jaw as soon as he did.

“Okay, Jay,” Jensen nodded slowly, relaxing when his eyes found Chris. “I’ll stay with Chris.”

Ignoring the customary nip of jealousy as Kane helped Jensen to his feet, Jared darted to the subtle cover of the trees and shifted, pulling on his jeans in a swift motion.

“He recognized your wolf, bro,” Jeff’s voice called out to him as Jared strode back to Jen’s side. The Alpha smiled briefly, remembering his older brother’s presence. The other Padalecki stood unobtrusively to the side and Jared read the hesitation in the eyes that were so like his own. Jeff didn’t want to intrude, but at the same time, he was as much a part of this as Jen was. He nodded minutely, and his brother stepped slowly toward them.

Jensen tensed at the slight motion, and nervously sought sanctuary by stepping close to Jared. Wrapping a protective arm around his mate, Jared pulled him as close as possible into his side, nuzzling him again. Relief made him almost obsessive, an insatiable need for a tangible connection between them burning inside him. It didn’t seem as if the smaller boy minded, though, judging by the way he snuggled impossibly closer.

“I’m here, baby,” he murmured soothingly, ignoring the other wolves observing them, but angling his body slightly in front of his mate to shield him from the scrutiny. “I’m right here, I’ve got you. Not gonna let anyone hurt you.”

Jensen nodded where he was pressed against Jared’s chest, hooking his hands into his shirt. It was an incredible shock to the artist, being that he was still so new to the Were world, and nearly getting attacked by a lone wolf was one of the worst experiences Jared could imagine. Glancing at Chris, Jared saw that Kane was ashen, and it was obvious he was caught in a place between the past and the present. He could only imagine the thoughts that were coursing through the wolf’s mind as he ran towards his brother.

As if he could read Jared and Chris’ mind, Jensen straightened, casting his eyes around him to find Chris and send him a shaky smile. Just the small action triggered a sense of relief in him, and Chris sagged, coming back to himself and stepping closer to them, obviously finding comfort.

“You’re lucky, Jay-rod.” Damn it, he’d forgotten his brother again. Jeff smiled at them. “Your mate is as brave as they come.”

Jensen ducked his face shyly, blushing at the praise.

“The cubs were here with him,” Jeff continued heedlessly, “when the wolf attacked. He bundled them against his chest and covered them with his body to make sure that they didn’t get hurt, even if he did. He didn’t even know the pups, but he protected them.” Jeff huffed admiringly. “It was the
bravest damn thing I’ve ever seen, from human or wolf.”

Jared swelled with pride, even as the reality of how bad things could have been sunk into him, making him weak with the force of it. He smothered his mate with kisses, uncaring of his brother standing there.

“You could have been hurt,” he breathed, censoring his anguish so as not to make it seem like he regretted Jensen protecting the little ones. “God, Jen…”

“I had to,” his lover murmured back, pressing his face against Jared’s neck. “They’re just babies, Jay.”

Jared nodded, biting possessively at the nape of his mate’s neck. “I’m proud of you.”

“He’s also smart,” Jeff broke into their moment, chuckling. “He knew who I was.”

“You look like Jared,” Jen contributed, looking shyly at Jeff, a little more confident with Jared there with him. “Your wolf, and your human form.” He cocked his head curiously to the side. “The real question is…how did you know who I was?”

Jeff smirked at him, that smug smile that Jared had come to realize meant that he was about to get embarrassed by big brother. “He’s so amazing, Jeff,” his brother mimicked in a high falsetto that sounded absolutely nothing like him. “He has like, the greenest eyes ever!”

Jensen burst out laughing and Jared growled in displeasure. While the sound might have had his pack quivering, it had absolutely no effect on the elder Padalecki. Stupid big brothers.

“Seriously, though,” Jeff grinned at Jensen, who was still chuckling. “Jared said you were the most gorgeous guy this town’s ever seen. I realized pretty quick who you were, and that my brother wasn’t exaggerating.”

His mate flushed sexily, and Jared kissed his neck territorially, finding out that his brother was no exception to his possessive jealousy. Before Jensen could formulate a response, he was snowballed from the side by an excited pup.

Jared grinned down at the runt, smaller than everyone in the pack, but still the gutsiest, spunkiest cub of the lot. He was surprised when Jensen reached down and lifted the pup into his arms, and he was even more surprised by how at-home the runt seemed to be, especially when he scrambled up Jen’s chest to nestle down in the curve between his neck and shoulder, burrowing there as though that were his place. It seemed his mate had made friends with the little ones, which was strange considering how the pups generally stayed away from the human populace.

“What’s his name, Jay?” Jensen asked distractedly, playing with the pup.

“Lucas,” Hayley answered before he could, smiling at Jensen. “I’m their mom, and the omega who owes you her life, three times over,” she gestured at the other two pups who were jumping excitedly at Jensen’s heels.

“You don’t owe me anything, Ma’am,” Jensen blushed, fastening his eyes to the pups. “They’re awesome little ones, so playful and adventurous and friendly. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

Hayley smiled at Jared, and he wondered whether his pride in his mate shone on his face the way it did in his heart. “He is as humble and loving and brave as Jim says,” she told him. “I couldn’t imagine a greater addition to our family.”
“I agree,” Jared pulled his mate, kissing the hollow beneath his ear. “And I think these little ones do too.”

The pups whelped happily, Lucas licking Jensen’s face and smothering him in puppy kisses. Jensen knelt down so as not to leave the other two cubs out, and the sight did something funny to Jared’s chest and stomach. A feeling burnt inside him, unfamiliar but fierce, one he couldn’t really identify.

“What’s their names?” Jensen enquired before he could think further into it. The pups were all over him, clearly enthusiastic about their hero.

“That’s Liam and Layla,” Jared pointed each little one out and they yipped in response, acknowledging, but still wary of him, likely because of the Alpha scent he wore. He made a mental note to bring Jensen and spend more time with the little ones; he needed to bond with the future of his pack, and they also seemed adorable, so that didn’t hurt.

“What can’t they shift like you guys can?”

“They’re still pups,” Chad was the one to answer this time, coming forward and ruffling Jensen’s hair; a gesture of affection to show that he was glad his pool-brother was okay. “They’ll shift by the time they turn four.” Jensen grinned at Chad in thanks, and the blonde haired alpha bumped his shoulder in response, winking at him.

The lack of sarcasm spoke a lot about how worried Chad had actually been about Jensen. Observing for the first time, Jared noticed that several other alphas had followed him on his mad dash to get to his mate, and he was amazed by the numbers. So many of them had reacted to the call… Then, something Hayley said registered with him.

“Jim mentioned Jensen?” he asked the older omega.

She nodded matter-of-factly. “He adores the boy, and it’s easy to see why. He likes him more than he likes some members of the pack, I reckon. We’ve all been waiting with varying degrees of impatience for you to finally introduce him to us.”

“Jared hogs Jensen all the time,” Chad sniffed teasingly, recovering quickly from his bout of anxiety. “I’ve been trying so hard to kick him of the habit.”

“What is it with you people and getting a laugh at my expense?” the Alpha grumbled as Jensen snickered. His mate kissed his cheek in consolation, grinning fondly at him.

“Don’t worry, Jay,” he whispered conspiratorially. “I don’t actually mind you keeping me to yourself.”

Best mate ever.

~*Jensen*~

If Jensen thought Jared was protective before, it was nothing compared to how he was when Jensen was on the packlands.

It was similar, he supposed, to how he acted when Jared was in gang territory, hyper vigilant and protective, especially after the scare with the lone wolf. Chris was just as bad if not worse, so
between them, Jensen had a perpetual bodyguard.

He had integrated easily into the pack, especially once word traveled about him protecting the little ones. He was welcomed with open arms by everyone except Gerald Padalecki, who wouldn’t even glance his way. It stopped bothering him as much, but he hated the effect it had on Jared. His lover denied it, but Jensen could see the way Jared deflated every time it happened, and frankly he understood the reaction. After idolizing the man his entire life, it had to hurt the future Alpha that his father disapproved of his choice. If it were anyone else, Jensen would have broken up with him for the sole reason that he hated seeing someone he loved being crushed by sadness, but he knew enough of the long-haired, hazel-eyed love of his life, and knew enough about their bond as mates, to say that leaving him would hurt a hundred and one times worse.

He wondered often enough whether talking to the stubborn man would do anything to change his prejudice. He would do it in a heartbeat if it meant easing the tension, but he was afraid to pick at the tenuous string the Padalecki family seemed to be balancing on. It was his own fault that they were at loggerheads to begin with, and he didn’t want to add to his rap sheet by being the one to cause a fall-out.

“It’s not your fault, you know.”

An amicable voice pulled Jensen from his mile-deep thoughts, and he looked up to find Jeff Padalecki grinning down at him. He stood up and dusted off his jeans, cleaning away the dirt that clung to him from where he was relaxing to keep an eye on the scuffling Kendall pups. Luke, Layla and Liam were often found at his heels, or in Luke’s case, on his shoulder, and more often than not, he babysat the pups as well as several others in the pack.

“What isn’t?” he asked quizzically, glancing over at the pups before fixing a smile on Jared’s older brother. He noticed idly that Chris hadn’t left him alone still, even in the presence of the elder Padalecki, and was instead in wolf form, playing with the little ones.

“My father’s jackass behavior,” Jeff answered calmly, sending a soothing smile at him. “He’s out of line. It’s not your fault.”

Jensen grasped at straws, fighting against the instinct to drop his jaw like a fish out of water. “I um… I…thank you,” he finally managed to grasp on to, “for saying that.”

“No, kid, I mean it,” he shook his head. “Don’t pay any heed to him. I’m married to an amazing woman, I have beautiful twins and I’m living a fantastic life in Seattle. And absolutely none of it matters to my father. He hasn’t even met his grandkids, all because my mate was someone from another pack.”

Jensen gaped, righteous indignation rising up on Jeff’s behalf. “That’s not okay!” he spluttered. “Aren’t you mad?”

Jeff nodded slowly, seeming to consider his answer. “I was, for a long time. But then I realized that there were more productive emotions than anger and resentment to hold on to. Like love.”

“I could get on board with that,” Jensen murmured, “if it wasn’t for how hurt Jared gets every time his father looks at me with that disdainful glare of his.”

“My little brother will learn soon enough.” Jeff waved a hand dismissively. “God knows he loves you enough that I bet he doesn’t even feel it after a while.”

“I never want Jared getting used to pain.”
“And that is precisely what makes you different to my father.” Jeff pulled him into a rough, one-armed hug. “I like you, kid,” he grinned fondly down at him. “Take care of my baby brother, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

###

“Lindsay,” he called to the club’s bartender absentmindedly, “don’t forget to bring in more ice. And call Daniel, remind him to buy more cordial and we’ll reimburse him.” The spunky blonde grinned at him, nodding in acknowledgement, and Jensen turned his attention to the task at hand. He was seated at the back booth of the club, balancing the books and relishing in the peace and quiet of the still-closed establishment. It was the only place he could get any work done, since it was the only place he had any sort of isolation, given that Jared was so overprotective.

Chewing unthinkingly at the top of the Penflex ball-point pen he was using, he tallied up the incomes on a calculator.

Later, he would blame the confusing accounting procedures for not registering the new presence right there in front of him.

“I never meant to scare you that night.”

Jensen froze abruptly, his blood running icy. The incident having occurred two weeks ago, Jensen had lowered his guard, and now he cursed his own foolhardiness.

Moving slowly to avoid startling the obviously skittish man, Jensen raised his head, taking in the washed out jeans and the forest green t-shirt first, before registering the sharp jaw and shaved beard, the green eyes and the dark brown hair with hints of blond roots.

All at once, he knew.

“Josh.”

At the address, a breathtaking smile of pure excitement and relief and love blossomed over the virtual stranger’s face. That was enough confirmation for him, and before he could stop himself, Jensen was out of his chair and throwing himself into Josh’s opened arms. His brother embraced him desperately, and Jensen returned it with equal ferocity.

“Oh, God, oh Jensen…” he choked, sobbing into Jensen’s neck. “I’m here, little brother…God, I…I just, I can’t…I can’t believe it, ugh…you got so big!” he laughed thickly. “I can’t believe it’s actually you.”

The other man pulled back to press a long, reverent kiss to Jensen’s forehead, and in that moment, flashbacks painted his eyelids; of sandcastles and hide ‘n seek matches, of toy cars and sleeping in a tree house in a back yard under a blanket of stars…of them.

And Jensen couldn’t fathom how he hadn’t remembered it all.

“I thought I’d lost you…” his brother murmured in anguish. “God, I thought I lost you, I thought I’d never see you again, but you’re here, and you’re okay, and you’re…fuck, you’re with me!” The brothers laughed shakily, and Josh brushed tenderly at the tears Jensen hadn’t even realized were falling down his cheeks. “I thought I was never gonna see you again, little brother,” he repeated, shaking his head as though he were waking up from a terribly long nightmare. Which in a way, Jensen guessed, he was.

“Yeah, well, what took you so long?” he teased good-naturedly, mopping at his face but keeping one
hand on his big brother’s shoulder, needing the contact to assure himself he wasn’t dreaming. “You took your sweet-ass time getting here when you could’ve just gone to Aunt Katherine.”

Josh glanced at him in shock. “Aw, Jense…” his face furrowed in a look of sympathy. “I thought someone would have told you, little brother…”

“Told me what?” Jensen felt confusion knitting his own brow.

“Aunt Kath’s been dead for nine years.”

###

**Chapter End Notes**

Le gasp! Don't hate me! ;-)

Leave me some love and let me know what you thought! <3

-Jay
Camping Kills...Or Maybe It Doesn't?

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys so, so much for the amazing response! I've been having a craptastic time lately, but your love, comments and support always make my day brighter!

I tried a different approach with this chapter, because I wanted to switch up the pace a little! Hope it works!

Enjoy! Much love! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

The air was clogged with a foul stench, gagging him even through the rough handkerchief that was wound roughly around his mouth. The more he wriggled around, the tighter the zip ties around his wrists and legs became, digging unforgivingly into the tender flesh until he felt the tell-tale, warm trickle of blood down his wrists and ankles. His back and neck ached with the strenuous position and his abdomen protested any slight movement that jarred his agonized ribs.

God, Jensen, he thought bitterly to himself. How do you get yourself into these situations?

~*Three days ago*~

“What the hell do you mean, Aunt Kath’s been dead for nine years?” Jensen nearly hollered, his heart rate stuttering before picking up triple time. Urgency made him latch a hand on to Josh’s shirt, and it was only then that he realized he was shaking. “Who told you that?”

“Calm down, little brother,” Josh grabbed his hand, brow furrowed in concern. “What’s going on, why…”

“Josh!” He felt bad for snapping, especially so soon after he was reunited with his brother, but the feeling of impending doom was hard to ignore, especially knowing how much of his life was exposed to…whoever the hell he’d been meeting with all this time. “Just tell me how you found out. Please.”

Maybe it was something Josh saw in his eyes, or maybe it was just so that Jensen would relieve the death grip he had on the other man’s t-shirt, but whatever it was prompted Josh to be as concise as possible. “When we…” he swallowed convulsively, “…crashed, just before the car hit, I opened the door, and I rolled out…I tried to take you with me, but your seatbelt was stuck and I didn’t realize until you slipped out of my grasp.” Josh’s eyes and voice turned pleading, and Jensen softened enough to squeeze his brother’s shoulder.
“I understand, Josh,” he nodded softly in compassion, “I know you would have saved me in a second if you could have. I don’t blame you.”

As it those were the magic words, the anguish in the older man’s face slowly faded until he was composed enough to continue his story. “Well, I passed out, probably from the fall, and when I woke up, I was in a bedroom. As far as I can gather, I was unconscious at the site of the crash, and my…” he faltered for a second, “…the people who took me in, they thought…they saw Mom and Dad…and then…” tears gathered in the corners of his eyes, “…then they saw you in the back, and you were…you were…”

“Josh…”

“They told me you were dead, little brother,” the older man fought for self-control, his voice breaking on the painful word. “I can’t…”

Jensen felt wretched for the way he was rushing his brother, who was obviously still in pain, but…Jared. It was his safety that Jensen was worried about, and it was his safety Jensen had put at risk every time he conceded and took Jared with him for those meetings. Pushing his own angst aside- because how could he have made a mistake like that, not recognizing his own aunt?- he focused his attention on Josh.

“I’m sorry, big brother,” he whispered, wrapping a supportive arm around him, “I’m sorry…but I need to know.”

Josh nodded, swallowing hard and leaning against him for support. “They took me in, raised me…they always wanted a child. They found out you were alive from the newspaper articles, but they never told me because they knew I’d have wanted to find you. Finally, when I was nineteen, they couldn’t take the guilt and they told me. I’ve been looking for you ever since. I went to Aunt Katherine’s first, but I only found Hank there. He was the one who told me that Aunt Kath had died.” He shook his head. “That’s why it took me four freaking years to track you down. I was close to giving up when a friend of a friend of a friend started talking, and the story worked its way along the chain to me, about a dark blonde haired, green-eyed ghost that went by the name JR…the only guy to ever beat Big Mike in darts, and in a fight.” Josh beamed at him. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

Jen nodded, only half-acknowledging the pride on his brother’s face. “How do you know Big Mike?”

“Only ever heard of the man,” Josh shrugged, before realization and fear promptly came on to his face. “Wait…how do you know him? And why did you have to kick his ass?”

“My foster father owed him money,” Jensen answered without thinking. “I won it back.”

Josh paled dramatically. “You’re not even legal yet!” he spluttered, shaking his head as he fought to understand the implications of the stories he’d heard. “But Jensen, they talk about this JR like he’s been around ages, he has such a big street rep that even I heard of him, and I didn’t even live there.”

Cursing his lack of foresight at the reaction, Jensen gently nodded. “I’ve had to have a lot of street cred, Josh…I became JR in order to accomplish that without losing…me. It’s been…a rough few years.”

“Oh, God, Jense, what have I done…”

Stopping the recrimination in its tracks, Jensen shook his head vehemently. “There was nothing you could have done. And I turned out okay, I promise,” he added with a wink and a reassuring smile.
“Of course you did,” Josh answered immediately, “you’re an Ackles.”

Jensen chuckled lightly, for the first time in his life, feeling a certain glow of belonging; to someone who shared his blood, so it was different to anything he’d ever felt before. Warm. Loving.

“So stop with the blame game melodrama,” he added flippantly, nudging his brother with his elbow. “The past is in the past. One day, we can exchange war stories, but for now, let’s enjoy the fact that we’re here together, huh?”

Jensen felt a twinge of guilt when Josh brightened at his words; not because he didn’t share in the excitement, but because he was willing to bet that Josh felt it a little more than he did. The primary concern in his mind just then was getting answers; not even meeting his long-lost brother could take the urgency of that matter away.

After all, it was his mate’s safety that was on the line, first and foremost.

Josh threw an arm around him, bringing Jensen from his thoughts. “Yeah,” his brother nodded, and it took Jensen half a minute to realize that he was talking about them finally reuniting. “I’m never letting you go again, Jenny boy,” he teased, and Jensen punched him in the sternum, the barest ghost of a memory flickering on the surface; he hadn’t liked that stupid name since childhood, but Josh was a persistent little brat.

“Jen?”

Jared’s voice sounded behind him, before Jensen could retaliate. He turned to find his boyfriend glaring ferociously at Josh, white hot rage almost tangible in the air between them. Josh stepped in front of him protectively, an action that Jensen had never been given the chance to properly appreciate or scoff at.

It was also an action that Jared didn’t particularly approve of.

A low growl sounding in his chest, Jared stepped forward and Jensen knew enough of Jared to tell that the man was beginning to lose what little patience he had. Intercepting them, he placed a hand on Jared’s warm chest, the Alpha instantly relaxing underneath his soothing touch.

“Jared,” he started quickly, before Josh or Jared could go into full-protective mode, “wait. It’s not what you think.” He took a deep breath, looking between them quickly. “It’s Josh, Jay,” he revealed in a low voice, watching as the announcement drained the color from his boyfriend’s face. “I know,” he added consolingly, squeezing Jared’s bicep. “I could scarcely believe it myself at first.”

“You wanna fill me in here, baby brother?” Josh’s slightly testy voice made Jensen flinch, acutely aware of the fact that he was about to come out to his brother—his only blood family left—in the first fifteen minutes of meeting him.

But then Jared’s hand drifted down to grasp his, almost as though he felt the tension in Jensen, and maybe he could, over their mating bond. Regardless of how, Jared knew, and that action of both support and possession reminded Jensen why he loved Jared, and why he would never need anyone but the hazel-eyed boy to survive.

Just like that, Jensen wasn’t so afraid anymore. He felt invincible when he was with Jared.

“Josh,” he lifted his chin in pride, “this is Jared. He’s my boyfriend.”

Josh stared at him for a full minute without moving, and Jensen worried, without breathing it seemed. He blinked owlishly, eyes going from their intertwined hands to Jensen’s face and back again.
“You’re gay?” he asked finally, a note of shock entering his voice and making it higher pitched.

Jared reacted instinctively, moving closer to him protectively, a low growl in his chest. Despair gripped Jensen’s insides and he tried not to let his trepidation show to his brother as he nodded.

“Yeah.”

For a long minute, Josh looked at him hard, searching his eyes for something Jensen couldn’t guess. It felt like his brother was trying to glimpse the color of his soul, and it was only through years of being JR that allowed him to hold the eye-contact without fidgeting like he wanted to.

“You’re happy.” It was less question and more statement, but Jensen nonetheless nodded.

“I am.”

Nodding slowly, Josh looked Jared up and down. “You being gay? Awesome, Jense, good for you. I’m proud of you for being strong enough to be who you are. But couldn’t you have picked a normal guy instead of Sasquatch here?”

Jensen huffed, a weird mixture of relief and humor bubbling in him. Jared too, relaxed, but Josh retained a bit of reservation in his eyes, despite his joke. Jensen filed that information away in his mind, making a note to bring it up another time. He didn’t want to hurt or aggravate Jared with the information; he would sort it out with Josh alone.

Because frankly, it didn’t really matter if his brother didn’t approve. He was ecstatic to have gotten him back, but if the choice was between him and Jared?

Jensen would tell him to enjoy the rest of his life, and go back to his mate.

Finally, an inkling of understanding hit him; when you find your mate, your soul mate, no one else matters as much. The realization took away some of his guilt over the spat Jared had with his father.

“In any event,” Jared brought him back to reality, “it’s good to meet you, man. Jensen’s been looking for you for weeks.”

Josh nodded in acknowledgment, returning the sentiment with sincerity that only Jensen could tell was fake.

“How did you eventually find Jen?” Jared asked, wrapping a possessive arm around his waist.

“Well,” even though Jared asked the question, Josh kept his eyes on Jensen as he answered, “I went to some bar, and the guy tending? I asked him if he knew someone named JR, blonde hair, green eyes, freckles…anyway, he said he didn’t know you, but then he tracked me down just before I left. Must have had a change of heart. He told me you were working here as a favour to a friend.”

“Why didn’t you just ask Jensen’s and your Aunt where he was?” Jared asked quizzically. Before Josh could cotton on, Jensen hastily covered up.

“Jay, Josh just told me…” he raised his eyes to meet Jared’s, hoping the hidden message there would be visible to his boyfriend. “Aunt Kath died a couple years ago. Explains why no one answered the land line phone.”

Instantly, Jared’s face became blank and his body tensed. The arm around him tightened to an iron grip but thankfully, Josh didn’t seem to notice the tension hanging thick in the air.
“Uncle Hank is there, though,” he supplied helpfully. “He should answer the phone, and any
questions you have about her.”

Jensen nodded slowly. “Remind me what their number is again?”

~Present~

Breathing through his nose, he tried valiantly to calm his rapidly beating heart. He knew he was in a
bad position; Jared didn’t know where he was, even if he knew what happened, and Chris…no.
Chris couldn’t come here, not for him. He wasn’t worth that. Silently, he sent up a prayer that his
best friend and big brother wouldn’t try to come looking for him, hoped against hope that Jared was
in enough of a mind to tell Chris to stay put.

But if anything was abundantly clear, it was that Jared was the furthest thing from rational when it
came to his safety. Trying to find a comfortable position in this God-forsaken situation, Jensen
remembered how difficult it was to convince Jared to let him see Hank alone. His boyfriend insisted
that he shouldn’t go alone, and now, Jensen wished he’d listened to the paranoia. Instead, he’d
convinced Jared to let him go alone, without telling Chris or Josh anything.

Jared had an Alpha meet, and given that he’d pissed his father off by running out of the last meet
with several alphas on his tail, Jensen insisted that he play nice and attend. Even in the face of Jared’s
pleas for him to wait, Jensen had stood firm, desperate as he was for answers. The whole scenario
was bothering him, from his Aunt’s mysterious death, which Josh knew nothing about, right up to
whoever had approached him a couple weeks ago. Eventually, Jared had relented, insisting that he
used the truck as a condition.

He was convinced that his memory didn’t lie, but there was so much to prove that it did. More than
that, there was something elusive dancing along the corners of his mind, something that he knew was
important, but he just couldn’t grab hold of it. It taunted his every waking moment, dancing
seductively on the brink of consciousness before slinking away once more. Jensen wasn’t by any
definition of the word, slow, and maybe it was the close emotional range, or the fatigue, but no
matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t focus his thoughts enough to form a coherent picture.

Until he spoke to Hank.

~The previous day~

“Jensen? Is that you, boy?”

Hank looked at him in disbelief, and Jensen was surprised to see tears building up in the older man’s
eyes. He stepped forward almost hesitantly, like he was afraid Jensen was going to disappear, and
held up a hand, pressing it against Jensen’s cheek.

The green-eyed boy stood perfectly still as the calloused hand, now feeling like paper from old age,
gently cupped his cheek, patting it as though trying to verify that he was real.

“Oh, thank God,” he uttered before pulling Jensen into a surprisingly strong hug. Shock made him
motionless in the older man’s arms; he thought Hank was the one to refuse him after his parents’
deaths. This man? He was the one Jensen remembered from childhood, affectionate and loving.
Cautiously, he patted Hank’s back.

“How are ya doing, Hank?” he asked politely, hating how stiff his voice sounded.

“Better,” Hank answered absently, his attention diverted by examining Jensen’s frame. “Now that I
can see you’re in one piece. You need to eat something though, Kid. They not feeding you properly
at that damn foster home they sent you to?”

From the bitter way that the man spat the words, something clicked into place for Jensen. “You
didn’t want me to grow up in foster care.”

“Of course not!” Hank blustered, motioning for Jensen to follow him as he walked into the living
room. “I wanted to keep you with us. With family. It killed me to know that you were going to go to
some new place with all these strangers to look after you instead of the people who already knew
you and knew how to care for you right.” Hank shook his head sadly. “But your Aunt…she had
other ideas.”

Yet another lie the imposter had told. Some of the ice on Jensen’s heart melted, and he aimed a
tentative smile at his uncle. “If it helps at all, the people they sent me to…they loved me a lot.”

Hank nodded slowly, wiping away tears. “I guess there’s that,” he allowed gruffly. “How old are
you now, Kid?”

“I’m eighteen.”

“That’s right,” Hank whistled, shaking his head. “Been nine years for your aunt, you know.”

Nine years…that number stuck stubbornly in his head, and he felt like it was key to figuring out the
puzzle in front of him. Biting his lip, Jensen steeled himself to take the plunge.

“No…no, actually, I don’t know, Hank. That’s kind of why I’m here…I only found out yesterday
that she had passed away. I just…I wanted to know what happened.”

Sighing gustily, Hank waved at the couches, indicating to Jensen to take a seat. Settling himself
comfortably on the one-seater, Jensen afforded his uncle his full attention.

“We were going camping,” Hank started. “We were going to be there for two nights, then drive back
in time to see the Fourth of July fireworks. We did it every year, and always at the same place, but
that year…God, I guess it was just a freak accident.”

Jensen waited patiently for Hank to gather his thoughts, leaning in once more when he resumed his
story.

“See, Jensen, I always checked out the places we went camping, every year. I made sure that there
wasn’t any sightings of dangerous animals, I checked the stats and probabilities of us finding a
dangerous animal at that time and confronting it. I could have sworn I had checked it all out…but I
guess I didn’t.” He shook his head in self-recrimination that was nearly a decade old. “There were
wild dogs. They attacked us…it was the damndest thing, Jense. I could have bet all the money in my
back account that wild dogs don’t attack without provocation, but these ones? They just came out of
nowhere and went straight for us. We both ran, and it was only once I’d gotten to the Jeep that I
realized Kath had slipped on some roots…” Hank shuddered, and Jensen felt a wave of sympathy
along with guilt at making him relive the nightmare. “I turned back to see her on the floor. She was
so terrified she couldn’t even scream, she was just sobbing and her mouth was open in agony with
no sound coming out.” His breathing hitched as tears slipped down his cheeks. “She was dead no matter what I’d have done. So I got into the Jeep. Hightailed it out of there like the coward I am.”

The crazy urge to defend came to Jensen. “You’re not a coward, Hank,” he comforted gently. “It was an awful situation, you did the best you could. And I know you wouldn’t have left her unless she was beyond saving.”

Nodding slowly, Hank shed some of his guilt-ridden disposition. “I just wish she could be here to see how you and Josh grew up.”

Deep emotion curled in Jensen suddenly, making him breathless with grief. How much had been taken away from him...how much had his family, both sets of them, been forced to suffer?

And God, when would it end?

As if sensing the turmoil in his thoughts, Hank reached over and hesitantly wrapped him in a hug. Jensen surrendered himself to the familiar, comforting arms that used to throw him up in the air and catch him sixteen years ago.

“We’ll land on our feet, kid,” Hank reassured him softly. “We always do.”

Nodding against his uncle’s chest, Jensen took in a ragged breath. “I’m sorry it took me this long to come see you.”

“Kid,” Hank laughed, “I honestly didn’t think you’d ever want to come back here again, that was assuming you remembered all of us at all. I’m just sorry I couldn’t come and fetch you. I tried, when your aunt died, but they wouldn’t grant me legal custody, and since Kath’s body was never found, they didn’t want to change custody either.”

“Her body was never found?” Jensen asked, straightening up as another puzzle piece fell into his lap. “Why? Do wild dogs normally drag their prey?” He flinched momentarily, hoping the callous reference to his aunt hadn’t hurt Hank.

“No.” He shook his head. “They’re notoriously picky eaters, in fact, in that they let a lot of the carcass go to waste.” This time it was Hank’s turn to wince.

Jensen, however, was too busy trying to figure out this fit into the bigger picture to be concerned with terminology. He felt like he was on the edge of a precipice, and he just needed one more thing to fall into place…

“Look, Hank,” he finally stood up, realizing that it was unfair to his uncle to be sitting there without talking, lost in his thoughts, “thank you for everything. I guess I just need some time to come to grips with it all,” he lied, “so I’m gonna take off.” Hank’s face fell almost imperceptibly, and Jensen hastened to add, “I promise I’ll be back around. So often you’re gonna get sick of me.”

Hank beamed at him, for the first time looking like the jovial man he remembered from his childhood. “That could never happen, kiddo,” he replied firmly. “Why don’t you give me your number? I’d like to talk to you more often, Kid. I missed enough of your life.”

Something warm lit Jensen’s insides as he rattled his number off and took Hank’s. As he got to the door, he was struck by something he’d always wanted to ask, but never really could to anyone else. Hank, though, could relate to his grief.

“Hey Hank?”
“Yeah, Kid?”

“What do you miss most about her?”

Hank’s eyes misted over and he sent Jensen a tremulous smile. “I’ll call you once I sift through all ten thousand things and manage to choose one of them.”

Jensen nodded, satisfied with the answer.

You could never really say what you missed most, when you missed most everything.

“Thanks, Hank,” he smiled gently. “And I’m sorry for making you relive that day.”

“Are you joking, Kid?” Hank shook his head, pain etched on to his features. “I see those damn dogs and their damn yellow eyes every night I close my eyes. My worst nightmare these days are of amber eyes.”

Hank closed the door, and Jensen was glad he did because he couldn’t keep a poker face at that bit of information.

A friend of his had done a research project in middle school about wild dogs, and he distinctly remembered the girl telling him about the species they got around here, and that they only had hazel eyes.

The only thing he knew that had amber eyes…

…a wolf.

What were the implications of that? He needed to talk to…

His timing as impeccable as ever, Jared phoned him as he walked down the driveway. Shaking his head, Jensen wondered whether Jared just had uncanny feelings, or whether he could read Jensen’s mind better and further than he was letting on.

“I love you,” Jensen told him, by way of answering.

“I love you too.” The smile in Jared’s voice could be heard over the phone. “And I gotta tell you, I could get used to you answering the phone like that.” He paused for a second. “Only when I’m calling, obviously.”

Jensen chuckled, feeling some of his tension slip away at the adorableness that was his lover. “Ever the possessive Alpha.”

“You love it, my beautiful mate,” Jared teased, making him laugh once more. “I just finished up at the stupid meet.”

“Did you behave?” Jensen put on his best stern voice.

“Of course, love,” Jared answered innocently, “when don’t I?”

“Why don’t I believe you?” Jensen asked dubiously, trying to ignore the fuzzy feels he got from Jared’s nicknames.

“Because you’re my mate and you know me better than anyone.”

Jensen smiled gently, softening his voice. “What happened?”
“Just my dad,” Jared sighed, “being his usual charming self. And by charming I mean…”

“Don’t mouth off,” Jensen cut him off, chuckling. “He’s still your father, and Pack Alpha.”

“You’re more respectful than me and my dad combined, baby.”

“That’s why your mom loves me best.”

“I wish I could argue that,” Jared scoffed, making Jensen smile over the phone once more. “But she does, so... you know.” Jensen chuckled, balancing his phone between his shoulder and ear for a second as he dug in his pocket for the keys to the truck. He’d parked a block away, unsure as to the reception he was going to receive and unwilling to put anything on anyone’s radar that could be traced back to Jared.

“It’s a gift and a curse,” Jensen joked as he slid into the driver’s seat.

“I know,” Jared’s amused voice came over the line. “I also know that you’re stalling. What’s the word there, love? Have you seen your uncle? Are you on your way home?”

“Yes to both those last ones,” Jensen answered, swinging easily out of his parking bay. “And get this; my aunt was attacked by wolves.”

“What?” his boyfriend’s disbelief was matched by his own. “Where?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, flinching in the face of hindsight. “I’ll call and ask him later.”

Before Jared could respond, Jensen heard the tell-tale clicking sound of an incoming call.

Hank.

“Hold that thought, Jay,” he told his boyfriend quickly. “Hank’s calling me. I’ll ask him now.”

Switching calls, he greeted his uncle. “Everything okay?” he queried.

“All fine,” Hank confirmed. “You headed home?”

“Yeah,” Jensen put his phone on speaker so that he could drive properly, laying it on the dash. “I’m nearing the edge of town. Hey Hank, where were you and Aunt Kath going camping that weekend?”

“We headed to Sycamore Park. Why?”

Jensen sucked in a breath; Sycamore Park was only about 30 miles from the packlands. Interesting…

“No reason,” he spoke faintly when he remembered his uncle was waiting for an answer. “Just curious, I guess.”

“You always were,” Hank chuckled. “You wanted to know what I missed most about her?”

“Yeah,” Jensen nodded, even though Hank couldn’t see. “Tell me.”

“I miss the way she smelled,” Hank answered wistfully. “That ridiculous vanilla perfume she always wore that drove me crazy because I was allergic to it.”

Jensen was glad he wasn’t holding the phone, because he’d have dropped it if he was.

All at once, the pieces fell together into a neat picture, and Jensen could have kicked himself for not
putting it together before.

“Hank I gotta go,” he blurted in a rush, pulling the truck over to the side of the road to avoid crashing in his excitement. Switching the call over to Jared before his uncle could answer, Jensen stumbled out of the truck, slamming the door shut. “I got it!”

“Got what?” Jared’s perplexed and slightly alarmed voice almost made him laugh. “Are you okay?”

Jensen’s mind was running a mile a minute, and before himself, came the concern for Chris. “You have to stay with Chris, make sure he doesn’t leave the house,” he said urgently. “I’ll be home as fast as I can, let me explain it all to him.”

“Explain what?” Jared demanded, alarm entering his tone. “Jensen, you’re freaking me out. What’s going on? Are you okay? I’m coming to get you.”

“I’ll be fine, Jay,” he forced himself to calm down. “I need you to stay with Chris for now. Please.”

“Then tell me what’s going on.”

Jensen blew out a breath, organizing his story in his mind. “You remember when Chris attacked me?” He didn’t wait for an answer, knowing that the moment was embedded in Jared’s memory for a lifetime. “Well, I couldn’t figure out what caused it, right? But I just realized! Aunt Kath was attacked by wolves that weekend, Jay. It was on Sycamore Park? I thought it was strange, because that’s so close to packlands, and I know no one from the pack would do that. Then I figured it out. They didn’t.”

“Who attacked your aunt then?” Jared asked, his voice tight. “And is she dead?”

“Hank thought she’d died that day because he thought she was attacked by wild dogs,” Jensen explained. “They never found her body, Jay. She wasn’t killed. She was turned.”

Jared’s breath left him in a whoosh but Jensen didn’t pause, needing to get his story out.

“She became a werewolf that night, but she let everyone think she was dead. This happened nine years ago, Jay…” Jensen waited for the significance of that number to impress itself on his boyfriend. “Nine years ago, around the same time that three lone wolves attacked Chris’ family and killed all of them but him. Jared…what if there was only two lone wolves, that became three when they found two campers that were ripe for the taking?”

“Oh, God…”

“They killed Chris’ family, Jay,” he revealed, his voice hoarse. “These are the wolves Chris has been waiting to kill for nine years.”

“How can you be so sure?” Jared asked weakly.

“Chris attacked me when he said he smelt something,” Jensen explained. “He once told me that he couldn’t stand the scent of vanilla because one of the wolves smelled like vanilla that attacked his family. My aunt only ever wore vanilla perfume.” He cursed himself. “I can’t believe I didn’t put it together sooner. The moment she saw me, she must have smelt Chris on me. She wanted to spend time with me so that she could use me to get to Chris. Maybe use me as bait.”

“Jensen, baby,” Jared’s voice was strung taut with tension, and he could practically taste the anxiety. “Come home. Now, please. If she ever wanted to use you as bait, she might still be after you.”
“I’m on my way home, Jay,” he soothed. “Protect Chris for me okay?” He hesitated a second before feeling the impulsive need to add once more, “I love you, Jay.”

“More than the moon and the stars.”

He smiled at the words they hadn’t spoken in a while. “Forever and always.”

He hung up, feeling an overwhelming agitation; an anxious, ominous feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“So you figured it out, my darling nephew.”

Jensen didn’t even have time to turn and face the sinister voice before he felt something fall hard against the back of his head. The darkness enveloped him before he hit the ground.

~Present~

He couldn’t believe he’d been this stupid. For so long, he’d drilled it into himself to listen to his instincts. It was what kept him alive for so many years.

Why hadn’t he listened to them this time?

He grimaced as sticky blood coagulated on his wrists and clothing. A light brown haired man had come in at some point, after he’d woken up here gagged and bound, and went to town bruising him up as much as he could. What stuck with Jensen the most was the unadulterated, fierce hatred in the man’s eyes, in his every kick, punch and shove.

This was someone he’d never met before in his entire life. How could someone he’d never met have garnered and harbored such a sheer hate for him? What had he done for him to lose control like that?

At one point, Jensen hadn’t been sure if the man was going to stop while he was still breathing.

He tried, for what felt like ages, to figure the conundrum out, all to no avail. Although he’d retained a semblance of calm and rationale through the thrashing, he was just too tired, his mind hurt and jumbled. He half snorted at the irony of the fact that his previous beatings gave him enough experience not to be freaking out and losing precious energy, salt and water.

The door in front of slammed against the opposite wall as it opened, and there stood his aunt.

She examined him critically, without moving an inch closer. “Seems like Gabe had a good time.” She shrugged nonchalantly. “Serves you right for killing Joe.”

“I didn’t…” Jensen struggled to speak or breathe, from what he estimated was broken ribs, “…kill… anyone.”

“Yes, you did,” she replied calmly, waving away his wheezy denial. “That wolf that attacked you in that clearing?” She rolled her eyes. “I told him not to get over excited, I told him that you would come to us. No, Joe always had to have things his way.” She looked at Jensen’s shocked face with a sick little giggle. “You didn’t actually think he was after those two cubs and that useless little runt, did you?”

“Don’t…talk about…them!” he snapped, paying for his anger with a coughing fit. He spat out a
mouthful of blood, before evening his already rough tone. “And Joe…was killed…because…” he took in a painful breath before foraging bravely on, “he tried…to hurt…us…not…my fault.”

Katherine simply shrugged again, almost disinterestedly. “They were lovers, or something. I don’t think Gabe’s gonna listen to your pathetic, broken-up reasoning.” She crouched down to his level, aiming a glare at him that finally contained some real emotion, even if it was hate. Hate that was matched only in Gabe’s eyes. “It worked out well for me,” she told him conversationally. “I wanted to kill you from the start, instead of only that long-haired hippie friend of yours. Gabe only listened to me when I brought back Joe’s body.”

“You seem like…the type…who does…the…evil monologue,” Jensen pushed the words out painfully, wincing when the slight jarring of his body as he breathed stabbed prickles of pain throughout him. “Tell me…how’d you…get past…”

“Your boyfriend?” Jensen nodded, and Katherine sneered smugly. “Easy. It seems Lover-Boy didn’t tell you much about our history,” she preened, as though she were born a wolf rather than turned. “A long time ago, when wolves roamed more freely and humans had more respect for Shamans than they had fear, the wolf packs joined forces with Shamans. Their sole aim was to co-exist peacefully, both with other wolves, and with humans, so the Shamans gave wolves the power to shift at will, as well as concocted a poultice that would allow wolves to roam around without other wolves realizing that they were anything but human.” She lifted her sleeve to show some of the remnants of a congealed, murky grey substance on her arms. “I had to get past your body guard if I wanted to get to you.”

“Why do…you…hate me?” he forced the words out, needing to know.

She sneered at him, her face twisting suddenly from her careful mask into an ugly look of resentment. “You killed my sister!” she spat. “She should have survived, not you!”

Slowly, her heavy breathing evened back out, and once again, she was composed and unruffled. “No matter, though.”

Smiling at him with what Jensen could only describe as insanity, she nodded.

“I’m going to deliver the fate to you that should have been dealt sixteen years ago.”

Icy cold drenched Jensen from head to toe.

God, Jay...please find me.

###

Chapter End Notes

Le gasp! Again! XD

Jared’s reaction to Josh is coming up next! Please leave me some love and let me know what you guys thought of this chapter...was pretty anxious about the way I was tying up all the mysteries of the past few chapters!

Much love! <3
Evil Monologues Can Be So Informative

Chapter Notes

If I haven't said it enough, you guys are just fantastic <3 Whenever I read your comments or receive your kudos, it brightens my day so much, and over the past few weeks, it's been such a source of comfort and strength. Thank you all SO MUCH for being the awesome readers y'all are!

Shout out to frostedgoddess, lovesickmelody and jungle_moon, all of whom were super amazing and supportive over the past week! Thank y'all so much for the love, guys!

Hope y'all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*Jared*~

“I have a bad feeling, man.”

Chad sobered as Jared made his declaration. Jared could tell that his friend was bursting with curiosity, and he, oddly enough, appreciated the effort he knew it took to reign the 20 questions in.

“Have you spoken to Jensen about this?” he asked.

“No yet.” Jared worried his bottom lip, a gesture he'd unconsciously picked up from Jensen. “I don’t want to worry him.”

Clucking disapprovingly at him, Chad frowned. “Well how’s he going to be careful unless you warn him to be on his guard?” he asked reasonably. “On his best day, Jen isn’t remotely careful with his safety.”

Jared huffed at the truth in his best friend’s words. His mate was always so focused on getting answers; to protect Jared and the pack more than to protect himself; that he took risks with his safety that left Jared more on edge than he cared to admit. At first, he thought it was all Jensen’s close experiences that had left him with plaguing nightmares, but the longer the vivid dreams woke him up with sweat plastered to his face, calling his mate’s name in a breathless pant, the longer he thought that maybe it was less of a night terror and more of a warning.

A warning that his Jensen was in danger.

Closing his eyes briefly, Jared flashed back to the latest nightmare...

“Jen?”

Jared’s eyes cast desperately around him as terror overtook his body.

“Jensen!”
Spurred on by bone-deep fear, he rushed down the seemingly endless corridor, throwing doors open as he ran, frantically searching for the briefest glimpse of dirty blonde hair, of freckles, of startling green eyes. It felt like he was running through jelly, and worse still was the crushing certainty that something was coming; something foul and dangerous that meant to take his beautiful mate away from him.

“JENSEN!”

“Jared.”

The breathless call stopped him in his tracks. He wasn’t sure, at first, whether he’d heard Jensen or whether his cruel mind was playing equally cruel tricks on him.

“Jared, please…”

With a start, he realized that it was his mate calling out for him, that it wasn’t simply wishful thinking. He ran towards the sound of the voice, stopping in front of a heavy oak door with peeling green paint. Something was etched on to the door, a logo of sorts, one he could vaguely remember.

“Jay…”

His head jerked up, and he chastised himself for wasting time trying to identify the odd symbol. Lady Luck obviously hated him in that moment, because as soon as he tried to turn the door knob, it fell off, hitting the cement floor with a clang. Bracing his shoulder, he rammed himself into the door a few times, persistence fueled by Jensen’s pain-filled cries, until it finally gave way against him and he stumbled into the room, almost falling on his face.

The room was dark and damp, and it reeked of blood, sweat and despair. He choked momentarily on the clogging smell of...

...rotting fish?

Gagging at the stench, Jared held his sleeved hand to his mouth and nose, trying to breathe through his mouth. His eyes darted around the large room, desperately seeking.

He almost rocked back on his heels at the sight he was met with.

Jensen was lying on the ground, breathing harshly, a slight rattle in his chest. More cloying than the fish smell, now, was the smell of his mate’s blood filling his nostrils as it dripping from various cuts and bruises over his body. His hands and legs were bound unforgivingly tight with zip ties and a length of material was unceremoniously shoved in his mouth, and tied behind his head.

“Jensen!”

Dazed green eyes blinked at him with all the focus of a cocaine junkie. The pain in their depths made Jared suck in a deep breath and fight back a monstrous growl.

“It’s too late, Jay.” Jared took a second to wonder how his mate was talking while he was gagged, before the ominous statement caught up to his awareness.

“Baby…”

“Too late,” his mate overrode his confused tone. “Too late.”

Jensen slumped over, eyes rolling to the back of his head, his body rapidly coated in an icy blue
Jared’s heart stopped.

“NO!”

“Jared!”

Snapping back to reality, the Alpha realized that he was gripping his chair in a death hold, claws and canines already halfway extended. Chad looked worriedly at him, grasping his shoulder and pressing down forcefully with his thumb in a gesture Jared knew was meant to ground him. He relished in the slight pain, but knew that he needed more than that to ground him after reliving last night’s dream.

“I’m sorry, man,” he mumbled apologetically to his friend as he got up, grabbing his jacket from where he’d tossed it on Chad’s bed.

“You’d better be going to Jensen,” Chad returned, a hint of friendly warning in his voice. “God knows you won’t be reliving your night terrors when he’s within reach of you.”

Even though his tone was light, Jared knew Chad wasn’t joking, and he felt mildly grateful for his friend’s understanding. “I’ll catch you later, man.”

“Call me, Jay-bear,” Chad called out in a high falsetto, because no, Chad Michael Murray could not end off a conversation without being a little obnoxious.

Jared grinned and flipped his friend off, momentarily distracted by the playful antics. Chad always was great at distracting him, ever since they were cubs. They got into the worst trouble together, to the extent where their mothers often insisted that they have supervision.

Not that it helped, Jared thought to himself with a chuckle.

Replaying some of his childhood escapades helped to ease the tension until he reached the eighteen-and-under club, where he knew his mate would be trying to get some managerial work done. Picking up a foreign scent near Jensen’s own distinctive smell put Jared on guard, and he walked quickly to the entrance, his earlier fears coming quickly to the surface.

White hot jealousy burst through his veins as the sight met his eyes; a stranger with dark blonde hair was hugging Jensen, holding tightly onto Jared’s mate.

“I’m never letting you go again, Jenny-boy,” the stranger promised with a smirk. Uncertainty warred with jealousy in his mind, and he could only manage one word just then.

“Jen?”

He glared heatedly at the strange boy, but whoever he was, he didn’t let the intimidation he felt override him. He stepped in front of Jensen in what the Alpha recognized was a protective gesture, and the very idea that Jensen would ever need protection from him, set off Jared’s short fuse.

He stepped forward menacingly, a low, territorial growl rumbling in his chest. Seeing this, his mate jumped into action, coming between him and the stranger like the martyr he was. Placing his hand directly over Jared’s heart calmed the Alpha instantaneously, the fury seeping away to give space for the all-consuming love he had for Jensen. It was amazing how the green-eyed human could have complete control over his blood-lust, but he chose wisely not to point that out.
“Jared, wait,” he pleaded in a low voice. “It’s not what you think.” Jensen locked eyes with him, and Jared was stopped more by the hint of disbelief in his lover’s eyes.

“It’s Josh, Jay.”

~*Chad*~

Chad Michael Murray was a pretty patient guy.

He grew up with a total hothead of a best friend, he was always the mediator when his parents and older brother fought, almost all his peers saw him as a joker and didn’t take him seriously, and from being a pool player, he’d make it a habit to read people, however long it took for their personality to leak through the cracks.

So you know. Patience was kind of a pre-requisite to his life.

Which was probably why he was perfectly content watching aforementioned hothead best friend pace a hole into his carpet while muttering inanely under his breath, trying to gather his thoughts before he could rant them out.

Steepling his fingers together, Chad kept himself completely still as he waited, only his bright blue eyes tracking his best friend’s relentless motion.

After ten minutes of the seemingly relentless back-and-forth, Jared finally turned to face him.

“Josh found Jensen.”

His eyes widened in shock as he digested the new piece of information. “What, imaginary-friend-turned-real-big-brother, Josh?” he asked incredulously, inwardly scoffing since, really, what other Josh was there?

“The very same.” Jared huffed, flopping back on to his bed and covering his face with his arms. “I don’t trust him.” The words were muffled by his arm.

Chad rolled his eyes at the display. “Please,” he commented dryly, “continue to speak into your armpits. I take great joy in deciphering your crazed ramblings.”

His best friend lifted his head up briefly to glare at him, pouting like a child, before flopping back down, putting the offending limbs behind his head.

“I don’t trust him,” Jared repeated, sounding much clearer, “but Jensen obviously does.”

Chad thought about that for a moment, grabbing a pencil and turning it around his fingers almost absently. “Well, Jensen has awesome instincts,” he pointed out. “What if you’re biased because you’re jealous?”

“What if Jen’s biased because he’s family?” Jared shot back. “And I’m not jealous.”

Chad grinned. “Maybe jealous was a bad word to use,” he allowed. “But you’re worried that this guy is going to take Jensen away. Right?”

The Alpha nodded silently, a troubled expression Chad hadn’t seen since their kindergarten days
taking residence on his face. Jared had been, for a long time, slipping into the infallible Alpha role, so seeing the vulnerability on his face now triggered long-buried instincts.

“Come on, Jay-Pad,” his voice softened. “After everything that’s gone on, don’t you think you almost kind of owe it to Jensen to trust him? I think that Green-Eyes has a handle on this one,” he used the nickname affectionately, “even though it may not seem like it. The truth is, man, is that Jen would choose you over the world 100 times over.”

“I know that,” Jared nodded softly. “But as far as I can tell, both alternatives leaves Jensen hurt.”

Understanding dawned on Chad as the root of Jared’s fear took hold of him.

“Jared,” he sighed sympathetically. “Sometimes we all have a choice to make in life. And then we have to deal with it. You can’t help it if Jen has to make that decision, all you can do is be there for him.” He waited a few moments for the advice to digest in his friend’s mind before adding, “You should talk to him about the brother though. Tell him you don’t trust him. And then tell him about your dreams.”

“I’ll talk to him about Josh,” Jared nodded resolutely, “but there’s no need to worry him by telling him about the dreams. I’ll protect him. They won’t come true.”

Jared shrugged his jacket on and clapped him on the back in thanks as he left. Sighing cavernously, Chad tried to bat down his own impending worry.

So many secrets…

He just hoped like hell Jensen wouldn’t end up paying the price for them.

~*Jared*~

*Tick.*

*Tock.*

*Tick.*

*Tock.*

*Tick.*

*Tock.*

*Tick…*

Jared tried hard to tune out the incessant taunt. The clock seemed to be personally mocking him the longer he waited in anticipation for Jensen to come back home. Fear churned in his gut and he paced the length of Chris’ living room, where he was waiting on the alpha. After Jensen’s phone call and his subsequent explanation about solving the riddles of the past month or so, Jared had come immediately to keep an eye on Jensen’s best friend, knowing his mate wouldn’t forgive him if he did otherwise. Kane was out on a date, and was due back any minute, and Jared wondered how he was going to explain his presence, and Jensen’s lack thereof, and Jensen’s worry without spilling the secret.
No easy feat.

Clenching and unclenching his fists, he wondered idly why he was feeling so on edge about Jensen’s safety. He had spoken to his mate a mere fifteen minutes ago, and he was on his way back to him right that moment.

So why did it feel like something had already gone terribly wrong?

The Alpha’s mind flashed back to images of long corridors, broken logos and dark, dank rooms.

His nightmares.

He knew Chad wanted him to tell Jen about the dreams he’d been having, but he saw no sense in worrying his mate, especially when he didn’t even know what they meant. Jared had gone to Mr. Beaver, seeking his advice as an elder were, and Jared thought that maybe that was the reason he was so anxious now…

~*Two days ago*~

“If you’re coming for help with that latest chem assignment, Jared, don’t. You’d be better off asking that mate of yours, it seems sometimes like he knows more than I do.”

Jared grinned in amusement as Beaver’s disgruntled voice rang out before he could even take more than half a step into the lab. The older professor often preferred to spend his time in the lab, as opposed to escaping to the packlands as soon as possible, and Jared often wondered the reason for that. He couldn’t fathom willingly staying cooped up indoors.

Glancing at him from over his horn-rimmed glasses, Beaver quirked an eyebrow in tempered boredom. “Are you just going to hover there,” he asked in a measured, almost curt tone, “or are you going to grace me with your presence?”

Flushing, Jared hastily went back into motion, closing the door behind him and walking to Beaver’s desk, hoisting his bag higher on his shoulder as he moved. He had to smile to himself at the man’s gruff demeanor; he’d known Jim Beaver since he was a pup, and the man was a complete softy at heart, but he tended to hide that behind a very brash exterior. Jared took it in stride, knowing that the man didn’t mean much by it.

“Hey, Sir,” he grinned cheerfully, pretending not to notice the slight quirk of the older man’s lips at his high spirits. “How was your day?”

This time, the healer and alpha set his pen down, leaning back in his chair to openly regard the future pack Alpha. “If you’re asking me about my day, that sure as hell means you want something, boy,” he deduced shrewdly. “You’re forgettin’ that I’ve watched you grow up, kid.”

Sinking down into the chair on the opposite side of the desk, Jared smiled sweetly. “Fair enough. On that note, Sir, what can you tell me about dreams? More specifically, dreams you have about your mate?”

Jared felt a pang of worry resonate through him when Jim’s eyes tightened, a blanket of unease coming down on the older alpha’s face.
“It’s too much to hope that you’ve been having wet dreams about him like a normal teenager, huh?”

Jared grinned wolfishly, trying to dispel the tension in the hopes that Beaver was overreacting. “I have those too, but I ain’t too sure you wanna hear about ‘em, Sir.”

“Not even on my best day, kid,” he snorted in agreement. Jared waited patiently while the man gathered his thoughts, forcing himself not to fidget or tap his fingers against his knee. “You’ve been having dreams about Jensen,” Jim started, leaning forward to rest his forearms on the edge of the table. “Nightmares?”

Jared nodded the affirmative. “I wake up in a cold sweat, calling out his name,” he admitted in a subdued voice, the terror and the sleepless nights wearing his usual good cheer thin. “And I mean, we can communicate telepathically, and I was just wondering what other extents our…”

“Whoa, hold on, boy.” Jim held up a hand, looking at him with a mixture of awe and disbelief etched on his normally stoic face. “You two can do what?”

“Communicate with mind-speak,” Jared repeated matter-of-factly, “You know, like when we all shift and talk within the pack.”

He didn’t fully comprehend the incredulous look on Beaver’s face, until he actually said the words.

“That’s…that’s not…normal?”

Jim stared at him a few seconds longer before coming back to himself. “No, um…kid,” his voice was more excited than Jared could remember it being in a long time, “this is…you talk telepathically? And can anyone else hear you’ll when you’ll talk like that?”

“No one.”

“Fascinating…”

“I don’t get it, Sir,” Jared huffed impatiently. “I’ll admit that it might be a bit…unorthodox, but…”

“This is more than just unorthodox, kid,” Beaver got up from his seat, coming to lean against the desk in front of Jared. “This is practically unheard of! Mates don’t have a special telepathic connection, above feelings and such. Let me put it to you this way; finding your mate is like finding the other half of your soul. When you do this, it creates an almost chemical reaction inside of us, which is why he or she suddenly smells like a combination of all your favorite smells in the world. It’s why their taste is the most exquisite thing on your palette and it’s why their heart calls out to you in ways you can never mistake. You can feel what they feel and your combined souls is almost like a sixth sense, more powerful than all your others…but it hasn’t ever extended to full-on telepathic communication.” The alpha took off his glasses, cleaning them with the edge of his shirt while he talked. “I’ve been mated with my wife for 30 years,” he told Jared, slipping the glasses back on, “and in all these years, we could only communicate when we were both shifted. Biologically, being that Jensen’s a human…well, theoretically, he shouldn’t be able to communicate with you at all, because he isn’t Were.”

Jared was reeling with the information overload, but he pushed past the sensations with considerable effort. “What, are you telling me that Jensen’s…I don’t know,” he snapped in frustration, “half-Were? Something else not human? What are you trying to tell me here?”

“Calm down, Jared,” Beaver soothed him, being gentler than he’d been in a long time. “I’m not saying anything of the sort. I’m saying the opposite, actually. This is a phenomenon that could only possibly result from a Human-Were mating. Jensen is all human…and you two would make for
fascinating studying. It’s been at least a century or two since we’ve had a cross-species mating.”

Jared felt a cacophony of emotions roll through him. He was pacified, but he had to admit...he was also a little...disappointed? He started violently when he identified the wretched emotion. Putting a name to it made it worse, because how could be possibly be disappointed at Jensen being human? He didn’t want his mate to be a Were...did he?

Pushing those confusing and complex thoughts to the back burner, Jared focused on the more immediate concerns. Jensen being Were or not was definitely not something to think about just yet.

“Anyway, Sir,” he shook his head as if it would clear away his confusing thoughts and feelings. “I just wanted to know if it was possible for these dreams I’ve been having to have some kind of...any kind of meaning.”

“You think they might be prophetic.” It was more a statement than a question, but Jared nodded even still.

“I’m concerned that they could be,” he corrected, hunching a little in on himself. “Has it been known to happen before or is this another phenomena that can’t give me any answers?” he griped petulantly.

“There’s a lot we don’t know about human-Were matings, Jared,” Beaver shook his head, crossing his arms in front of him. “We do however, know that mates are prone to getting feelings of dread or warning when their significant others are in trouble. Being that you and Jensen seem to display all the primal and core components of mates, only to an exacerbated extent, it almost stands to reason that you’d be having prophetic nightmares instead of just the normal bad hunch.” Eying him critically, the healer added, “Probably, possibly…but not conclusively.”

Jared took a deep breath in, trying not to lose his patience with the elder pack member for his technical answer. “Evidence aside, what do you think about it, Sir? Do you think that is what’s happening?”

“I think that it’s possible,” Jim nodded slowly. “I think that this is your mind’s way of processing the danger you sense coming towards your mate. But the thing is, Jared, is that we have nothing to hold this against. Any record we have of any cross-species matings before your own...well, they’re tainted.”

“How do you mean?”

“The only record we have of them is from word of mouth,” Beaver explained. “I can’t bring myself to trust that, because packs have been trying to eradicate those matings about as long as they’ve existed. The only couple I’ve ever known that...” Beaver stopped abruptly, giving Jared a guarded look that made him pause. Shaking his head as if her were mentally berating himself, Jim changed his course. “Anyway, I’m pretty open-minded,” he pushed off the desk and made his way back to his seat, “but I can tell you that not many Weres are. Correct me if I’m wrong, son, but your daddy...he doesn’t approve of Jensen, does he?”

Jared’s silence spoke louder than he ever could have.

“Don’t take it personally,” Jim told him. “Your daddy was raised in the old way of thinking. It’s just a lot for him to come to grips with.”

“What’s so wrong with it?” Jared asked moodily. “Mating...that’s a sacred bond. It’s one of the most important and most precious things that could happen to a Were. Why does it matter if it’s with a human?”
“A long time ago, the Were packs joined force with the Shamans of the world, in order to maintain a peaceful co-existence of all the species on earth. It was foretold by these Shamans that cross-species matings would be the destruction of our species, because the human would always betray Were-kind.”

Jared flushed in anger at the explanation. “Jensen wouldn’t ever…” he started hotly.

“I know,” Beaver interrupted him. “And I think that everything they said about human-Were pairings was said purely out of cynical fear. Even then, no-one could fathom a human being able to feel and comprehend all the intense, age-old feelings that matings bring. To them, it was impossible, and that being said, it was easier to make them believe that humans couldn’t feel that profound bond.

Besides,” Jim added, “the average life span of a human is a fraction of our own. There are so many things that can kill a human mate. Illness, accidents, nature…we’re more resilient creatures, and you have to beg the question; if a Were mated with a human, and then only got to spend a small amount of time with that human, what would become of the Were once the human died?”

Jim fixed him with a troubled look.

“What would become of the pack if they lost pack mates because they couldn’t handle the loss of their significant others?”

~*Present*~

Jared hadn’t slept that night, mulling over the question. On the one hand, it did make his reaction to Jensen being human a little more sensible. Deep in his heart, in that locked away part he didn’t want to face yet, he knew the chances were high that he would outlive his beautiful, amazing mate. He couldn’t- *didn’t want to* face that. And he wouldn’t have to if Jensen was a Were.

But Jensen was human, which brought Jared back to Beaver’s question. A question he really didn’t want answered, because he already knew. Knew what would become of him without his Jensen. The answer was buried even further away, with his own demons about losing Jen.

Now, though, all his terrors came rushing to the surface. Impulsively, he whipped out his cell and pressed down on one to call his mate.

“*You’ve got Jensen, you know what to do.*”

Jared sank to the couch as the familiar voice of his beloved mate rang cheerfully in his ear. Why was he getting voicemail? Had Jensen’s phone died in the last twenty minutes…or…

“Jared, why am I smelling you and not Jensen?”

The Alpha was jerked from his thoughts when Kane’s casual voice wafted over him. Chris was taking off his jacket and walking towards him, and after a few seconds, the other wolf appeared in his line of vision.

“Where’s Freckles?” he asked again, frowning curiously. “And why do you look so wrung out?”

“Chris…” Jared started, hesitantly. His gut was telling him that he needed to get his head out of the sand. That Jensen was in danger, and that the nightmares was exactly as much as Chad worried they were.
I’ll protect him, Jared heard his own words to his best friend ringing in his head. *They won’t come true.*

“Jared.” Chris’ voice barged through his thoughts once more, more alarmed now as Kane’s face took on an edge of fear. “Where. Is. Jensen?”

Jared swallowed convulsively. “I think he’s in trouble.”

~*Jensen*~

There was funny crackling noise permeating the air that came from his chest whenever he took a breath.

Jensen was briefly reminded of the time he’d had bronchitis as a kid; Jody had snuggled in bed with him and they’d watched movies the entire day, and Eric had waited on him hand and foot with hot soup and cocoa with marshmallows in them. In retrospect, he could almost conclude that it was worth the pain for all the love he’d felt in that moment.

Here- wherever ‘here’ was- he was surrounded by malignance. After her icy promise, Katherine had left, and Jensen was grateful that her partner hadn’t made a reappearance as yet. He shivered slightly, his body almost numb from the cold concrete, and the slight motion jarred his broken ribs, making him whimper in pain.

He was beginning to worry that his abdomen was more injured than he knew. He’d had plenty broken ribs before, but they had never caused the burning sensation he felt in his lower torso. The skin there was hot to the touch, and a vague throbbing in his shoulder was cause for pause, because he didn’t remember more than a little bruising to that area.

*What I wouldn’t give to talk to Jared…*

He could only imagine how his mate must have been freaking out. He was supposed to have been home at least four hours ago, and his Alpha had to be going crazy looking for him.

*There has to be a way to give him a clue.*

As soon as the thought took root in his mind, Jensen refused to let go of it. He cast his eyes around the sparse room, clinging all the while with a tenuous grip on that last shred of hope. There was nothing much note-worthy in his surroundings, nothing that could really contain a clue.

*The key lies in awareness, kid,”* he heard Aldis and Matt in his head, a flashback of them training him coming to mind. *“Sometimes, it’s not only about what you can see. It’s also about what you can hear, smell, taste, feel.”*

“Let’s do it your way then,” he whispered to himself. Closing his eyes, he gave himself over to his senses. There was nothing much in the way of touch…all he could feel was the ice cold concrete, and even that wasn’t going to last long at the rate he was becoming numbed with cold.

Straining his ears, he could faintly make out the sound of cars. Somewhere else in the distance was the unmistakable buzzing sound of a flickering lightbulb and maybe he was imagining it, but Jensen could have sworn that he could hear the tolling of a bell…but for all he knew, it could have been a stretch of his overtaxed mind.
Groaning inwardly, Jensen forced himself to breathe in deeply through his nose. He had been breathing through his mouth purely so he could avoid the rancid stench, but now he made himself breathe in a lungful of the vile odor, fighting his gag reflex on willpower alone. It was of…rotten fish?

Jensen wrinkled his nose, convulsing at the wretched smell. Where the hell was he? Why was he smelling rotten fish? And more to the point, why did it smell so…sharp? While it was a normally pungent smell, it had never been so overpowering that it almost burnt his nostrils to smell it.

Sighing in frustration, Jensen let his head fall back on to the wall he was resting against. None of this made a whole lot of sense. He could, with a stretch, understand his Aunt wanting to kill him—grief oftentimes made people crazy— but why were they also interested in Chris? They’d killed his family, so maybe it was simply a case of finishing what they started…

No, Jensen dismissed the thought as soon as it came. No one went to these kinds of lengths purely to finish a 9-year vendetta. What was it about Chris that they were fixated on?

His instincts told him that the answer to that question was an important one. Kane would undoubtedly be part of the rescue team here, and Jensen had the nastiest feeling that if he didn’t have all the facts before then, that someone would end up getting hurt.

But what were the facts?

“You’re thinking pretty loudly there, nephew.”

Lifting his head, Jensen blamed his lack of awareness on all the mitigating factors surrounding his confinement. Katherine regarded him with a cold stare, the eyes that were so painfully like his mom’s, inconceivably hateful.

“Why’d you do it?” he asked softly, defeat in his tone and posture. “Why’d…you kill them?”

“Your friend’s family?” she asked, a look of disdain twisting her normally pretty features into something awful. “They were roaches,” she scorned. “They deserved to rot for what they were.”

Jensen bit back the burning question, knowing that if he asked what she was talking about, she would shut down completely.

“Don’t talk about them… like that!” he went on the defensive instead, hoping to antagonize her into revealing more. “They were… good people!”

“You would say that! You’re just like them!”

His mind racing, Jensen tried to find what he had in common with the Kanes. He forced back his frustration when he came up empty.

“And I suppose… we’re wrong, and you’re…you’re right?” he bluffed, hoping she wouldn’t catch on to his fishing.

“Of course,” she sneered, thankfully still so full of indignation that she hadn’t realized Jensen had yet to reveal any specifics. “You’re just…unnatural. And they were too.” She shook her head in disgust. “So full of righteous indignation…that woman could have saved her entire family if she’d done as we suggested. She brought this upon them.”

“What could…Mrs. Kane possibly have…have done?” Jensen struggled to get the words out the longer he tried to talk. The pressure on his broken ribs was becoming overwhelming.
Broken ribs notwithstanding, it was the next words out of his Aunt’s mouth that left him reeling.

“She could have turned!” Katherine spat venomously. “She could have turned, but they refused! They were both adamant that she remain human!”

~*Jared*~

“Damn it!”

The glass of his window shattered as he slammed the truck’s door closed, the sound becoming background noise to his roar of despair. Finding the truck abandoned on the side of the road was enough to cement his previous concerns. Chris and Chad stood a few feet away from him, allowing him his moment of weakness as they undoubtedly tried to come to terms with the fact that Jensen was missing, and Jared was grateful for the illusion of privacy. He knew that they both probably had a ton of questions and both were likely trying just as hard not to lose their shit.

“We need to case the entire area,” Jared ordered in a low voice, as soon as he felt up to talking. “Check for any clues to where he was taken. Chad,” he regarded his best friend solemnly, “check the surrounding area now, Kane and I are gonna see if there’s anything of Jensen’s around here, so we’ll know where he was caught.”

Even having known each other since kindergarten, Jared was no less grateful when Chad caught his silent plea to leave him alone with Chris. The blond haired boy nodded, uncharacteristically silent as he shifted and ran a little ways into the woodsy area on the right of the road.

“Something you need to tell me, Padalecki?” Chris asked gruffly, and Jared took the rough tone in stride, knowing that it was born from fear.

He nodded slowly. “Chris…Jensen found out some things on his trip here,” he told the other alpha softly. “He didn’t want… he wanted to be the one to tell you himself,” Jared rephrased, “but being that I know you’re gonna wanna help look for him, I think you ought to know everything beforehand.”

As the boy nodded jerkily, Jared could see Kane was losing patience the longer they weren’t looking for Jensen, and frankly, he was pretty much the same way.

“Jensen’s aunt was attacked by Weres,” he explained quickly, “and she was turned by them. Jensen was always wary of spending time with her, because he thought she had an ulterior motive, and so he came here to speak with her ex-husband, in the hopes that he’d find out what she might be after. He found out that she was turned by two lone wolves, in Sycamore Park, nine years ago.”

Chris sucked in a breath, his face paling dramatically, leaving no question as to whether he’d caught the significance of those details.

“Those were the…” he stuttered, his face ashen. “The wolves that…that attacked…”

“Yes.” Jared made his voice soft, empathy taking hold of him despite his own pain. “They were using Jensen to get to you. He was smart, covered all his tracks whenever he met them, so they could never get to you. I think they took him now to bait you.”

Jared worried about whether Chris was going to blame his mate; a concern he knew Jensen had had
as well. His mate was stricken to find out that his own blood had taken Chris’ family away from him, and Jared wasn’t above taking extreme measures and using his Alpha sway to keep Chris away from Jensen if it so happened that the alpha did blame him.

But the low proclamation from Kane’s mouth quickly dispelled Jared’s fears.

“I’m not going to let them take the last person in my family away from me,” he vowed fervently. “We have to find him Jared.” Chris’ face contorted in sudden pain. “Aw, Freckles,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. “He must be killing himself over this,” Chris shook his head. “God knows he’d blame himself for The Plague if he could have.”

Jared couldn’t even bring himself to feel slightly amused. “Let’s look around,” he told Chris decisively. “Hopefully, we find…”

His voice cut off abruptly when an old green Ford pulled up across the road from them. The driver jumped out, heading over to them, his gait purposeful and his face blank. Rage ignited in Jared’s veins as he considered the implications of the man’s presence here.

Joshua Ackles.

~*Jensen*~

Chris’ mom was…was human?

*Chris* was half human?

And his mom…was HUMAN?!

Jensen tried to shutter the shock that he knew was on his face, in his eyes. In retrospect, it explained so much; why Chris’ family lived so far away from the packlands, why Chris only became part of the pack when his family died, why no one had been around to help them the night they were attacked…

“Even Padalecki saw them for the rejects that they were,” Katherine carried on obliviously. “He exiled them from the packlands, even when he found out that their spawn was half-Were. Abominations,” she sneered, and Jensen’s hackles instantly rose. “But they had some Were blood in them, so we would have let them live. If she had just agreed to change.”

Jensen realized with bitterness that she had also explained one of the main reasons Gerald Padalecki disliked him so. Prejudice, likely combined with the fear that a similar fate to the Kane’s awaited Jared.

Jensen was momentarily struck with fear; *did it?* Was it possible that there were still werewolves that despised the idea of cross-species relationships to the extent where they would kill for it?

Was he putting Jared in danger by being with him?

“You can imagine my surprise,” Katherine smirked, bringing his mind back to the present, “when I realized the Padalecki heir was your mate. It gives me the perfect reason for killing you.”

“Killing me…I get that…” Jensen wheezed, his need for answers driving him past his pain. “But
why do you…want to kill…my friend?"

He steadfastly refused to speak Chris’ name in front of them, feeling oddly like the action would taint his brother.

“We’re simply dedicated to the cause,” Katherine simpered, saccharine sweet. “Cross-species matings were abolished from the start, and that is the way it should be.”

Feeling desperate, Jensen allowed his mind to go to the place he’d been trying to lock away since the moment he found out the truth about Jared. “And if…if I wanted to…change?”

Katherine smiled, but it was the smile of a woman so full of malice that the very air around her seemed to darken with it.

“Well,” she leaned forward and patted his cheek in a move so maternal that Jensen jerked backwards, choosing the pain over having the motion twisted with her malevolence. “They’ll never know that you were willing to change, honey.” She tutted, mock pitifully. “By the time they see you again, you’ll be dead.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Le gasp! Again! I hope y'all enjoyed the dip into Chad's mind, and I can't wait to see your responses to Josh's mysterious presence there!

Please leave me some love and let me know what you thought of this chapter!

Much love! -Jay_girl <3
"You better have a damned good excuse for being here."

Before he could register the repercussions of what he was doing, Jared had Josh by the throat, pinning him with enough force against his own car that he couldn’t move an inch. Josh’s hands flew instinctively to his throat, clawing at Jared’s iron, unyielding grip, gasping even though he wasn’t physically choking.

Yet.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, man?” he spluttered, terror in his eyes. Jared scoffed inwardly, the part of him that was trying to forget his mate was in trouble, taking the time to recognize how much braver Jensen was than his brother.

“Why are you here?” he asked stonily, not relinquishing his grip. He could feel Chad and Chris’ unease from behind him, rolling off the other wolves in waves, but he couldn’t care for it. No stone would be left unturned in trying to find his mate, especially not when he was already so suspicious about the brother.

Josh glared at him as he struggled, his eyes like daggers. “I don’t have to explain myself to you,” he spat belligerently. Jared felt his eyes flash with anger and he was pleased to see the fear return to the older boy’s eyes.

“I would answer him,” Chad piped up. “If only for the fact that he’s kind of the one with the upper hand here. Ya know. Just saying.”

Josh threw another glare at Chad and Jared tightened his grip ever so slightly, encouraging him to keep his focus on the Alpha. Josh’s eyes widened and he began his struggles anew.
“Fine!” he gasped finally, pounding at Jared’s forearm as though it had any effect. “Fine, okay, fine! I was here because one of Jensen’s old buddies promised to give me the dirt on you.” Jared was treated to a vicious glower. “I needed to know why I had such a bad feeling about you, and how I could persuade Jensen that knowing you was going to land him in hot water.”

Jared raised an eyebrow at him, loosening his hold a little bit. “You came here to try to find a way to break us up?” he confirmed blandly, his tension leaving him as rapidly as it came. This was absolutely of no help to him.

“Yes,” Josh tilted his head in defiance. “You better be ready to hit the road, Jack.” Jared didn’t even have the energy to deal with Jensen’s brother, not if the man was going to be next to no help.

“Sure, sure,” he nodded dismissively, letting the other man go and trying not to take too much pleasure in him scrambling quickly backwards in a decidedly unmanly way.

“Wait, hold on.” Josh picked himself up, his face calculating as he sized up Jared. The Alpha Were stared back unflinchingly. “If you’re here, going apeshit on me, and my brother isn’t here to stop you…” Josh trailed off, an unfamiliar, almost vulnerable look finding its way into his eyes. “Where...where’s my brother?” His voice grew stronger, even through the terror that presented itself. “Where’s Jensen?”

Jared was caught between a rock and Jensen Ackles. He knew that if he told Josh his brother was missing, that Jensen would be mad at him for involving the elder Ackles in something possibly-probably-dangerous. If he didn’t, however, he could be limiting himself in the way of contacts. If Josh had some means to find his mate, he would never know about it. What had first seemed like a difficult decision quickly became abundantly clear to the distraught, hazel-eyed wolf; it was worth risking his mate’s wrath if it meant finding him before…

Cutting that thought off at the knees, he met Joshua Ackles’ questioning glare. “Your brother is missing.”

“Missing?” The other Ackles’ voice went up several octaves. “What do you mean, he’s missing? Since when? Have you contacted the police? Has he been kidnapped or did he run away? How long has it been since someone’s seen him? Spoken to him?” The rapid-fire questions made Jared blink momentarily, but he fast composed himself.

“He hasn’t been missing very long,” Jared shook his head, trying to steel his heart against the emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. He needed to be clear-headed. “I spoke to him just a few hours ago. We can’t contact the police yet; you can’t file a missing persons report unless the person’s been gone longer than 48 hours.”

Jared made a mental note to be thankful for all the crime shows he’d watched.

If Josh realized he’d made no reference to his question of whether Jen was abducted or went willingly, the elder man showed no outward reaction. Instead, he began pacing back and forth, fear splashed across his features.

“What was he doing here, do you know?” Josh asked, seeming to forget how much he hated Jared in favor of his worry over his brother.

“He came to see your uncle,” Chris answered for him, and Josh’s attention snapped between them. “He came looking for some answers, and he was on his way home when Jared heard from him last. He was supposed to be back home hours ago, and when he wasn’t, we came here.” Chris gestured behind himself. “Found Jared’s truck abandoned.”
Josh took this in, leaning against the hood of his car. He ran his hand distractedly through his hair- a gesture uncannily resembling of his younger brother- and sighed gustily.

“We’ll split up and look for him?” Josh phrased it as a question, unwittingly deferring to Jared. The Alpha nodded.

“We’ll take a direction each,” he decided. “Meet back here in 2 hours. Any evidence of what might have happened, we’ll take pictures of, and we’ll puzzle it out when we meet back here.”

He almost felt he was back on the football field, a quarterback giving his team their play. He stopped himself from the usual “Ready, break!” by biting on the inside of his cheek.

As they all turned to leave, Josh stopped them. “You guys…” the man looked troubled. “Do y’all have silver knives?”

If their reactions were anything to go by, Chad and Chris were just as alarmed and on guard as he was.

What business did Joshua Ackles have, knowing anything about silver knives?

“Why?” he dared to ask, working hard to maintain a cool exterior. It didn’t look like the green-around-the-gills man knew their secret…but he obviously knew a secret. “What’s special about a silver knife?”

Josh flushed scarlet. “Nothing special,” he denied, attempting to adopt an aloof tone. “I just…there’s this…a friend of mine,” he finally settled on those words. “A friend of mine, he told me that I should carry one around with me. That it would keep me safe from any…creatures in the woods.”

Jared’s blood ran cold, and his packmates fixed their eyes on him, even as alphas, looking for their pack leader to take the reins. Jared forced an impassive look on to his face, trying hard not to react to the knowledge that their secret was in danger.

“There are no creatures in the woods,” he spoke steadily, almost laughing at the look Josh gave him that was part worried and part conflicted. It would seem that the elder Ackles actually wanted to warn him.

“All the same, Jensen would kill me if we got him back and your ugly mug was ruined,” Josh snarked, and really, that was what it came down to. Josh would do anything for his brother just the same way Jared would do anything for his mate and lover.

A level of respect and understanding thawed some of his resentment. “We’ll be careful,” he nodded, “and the three of us have knives with us,” he lied smoothly. “Jensen got us into the habit, said it was better to be safe than sorry. After his time over here, that was more or less his maxim.”

Josh didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t push the matter either. Nodding once, he set off North, not waiting for them to go their directions.

“He knows.” Chad fixed wide blue eyes on him, and he could feel the concern rolling off his best friend in waves. “How the fuck does he know, Jay?! You don’t think…Jensen wouldn’t…”

“Not in a million years,” Chris defended in a steely voice, before Jared could get the words out. Chad instantly looked chagrined, blushing lightly.

“I know,” he nodded, rubbing at the nape of his neck. “I’m sorry. Didn’t think.”
“None of us are thinking straight right now,” Jared allowed, trying to ease the tension. “Pointing fingers isn’t going to help until we find Jensen. He’ll be able to get the truth from his brother.”

“You know what this means though, right?” Chris asked solemnly. The long-haired alpha’s eyes glinted with unease. Jared nodded worriedly.

“We have a traitor.”

~*Jensen*~

“Hey, baby, did you know that the first church bells were introduced in AD 400 by Paulinus of Nola? By the 11th century, it was practically commonplace.”

Jensen looked up at his boyfriend in amusement from where he was sitting, sketching the scenery of the beautiful packlands. The Alpha was sprawled on the ground next to him, eyes watching the clouds in the sky, content in their moment of peace.

It was the first time Jared had relaxed since the lone wolf had attacked him.

Deciding that he needed to spend some quality time with the love of his life, Jensen closed his sketchbook with a firm snap, shifting his body until he sprawled out next to Jared, tucked into the Alpha’s body. Jared smiled at him, for the first time tearing his eyes away from the skies.

“Is that so?” Jensen shook his head solemnly. “I don’t know how I could have lived all this time without knowing how church bells came about.” Jared pouted, and Jensen didn’t fight the grin that spread over his face.

“Just thought I’d share a random fact,” Jared sniffed. “You don’t have to poke fun.”

Smiling partly in fondness, partly in remorse, Jensen settled his arms around his lover’s torso. “I’m sorry, Jay.” He aimed wide eyes at his boyfriend, knowing the man couldn’t stay mad at him for too long. “Tell me more?”

Predictably, Jared’s frown was replaced by a happy little smile that Jensen was no more immune to than Jared was to Jensen’s eyes.

“In Christianity, the Anglican, Lutheran and Catholic churches rang the bells three times a day,” he explained. “Once at 6am, once at noon, and once at 6pm, to call the townspeople’s attention to the fact that it was time to recite the Lord’s prayer.”

Jensen quirked his eyebrow. “They teach you that stuff in Sunday school?” he asked dubiously.

“No,” Jared chuckled. “I like history. I love reading up all these random facts. I find the past… fascinating. Don’t you?”

Jensen pondered that for a moment before shaking his head. “I’ve spent a long time running away from the past,” he said frankly. “I never really sought it out.” Settling himself more comfortably, he allowed his eyes to drift to the clouds above them, wondering what his boyfriend saw when he looked there. “Tell me another of your crazy facts.”

“Hmm.” Jared took a moment to think about which one he liked best. “There was a guy who had
“the hiccups for 68 years,” he grinned brightly. “He fell and damaged the part of his brain that inhibits the hiccups response, so he had hiccups for 68 years straight.”

“Shit!” Jensen cringed in sympathy. “I used to think hiccups were fun, when I was a kid. Guess that guy would respectfully disagree.”

“Damn straight.”

They cuddled for a moment in silence, each boy as much lost in their thoughts as they were connected to one another.

“When I was a kid, I used to think the clouds followed me whenever I ran,” Jared grinned suddenly down at him. “I was almost always in my cub form, and when I wasn’t getting up to no good with Chad, I was trying to win a race between the clouds and myself. I convinced myself I won, a couple times.”

Jensen returned the smile, affection in his endless green orbs. “That’s freaking adorable,” he chuckled. Getting up suddenly, he dusted his jeans off. “Bet ya can’t beat me!”

Jared was up and after him before Jensen could get further than ten steps away.

###

He wished so hard that he was back in that moment.

If he tried hard enough, Jensen could almost remember the smell of the woods that day; piney, earthy, wholesome. He could hear the rustling of the leaves in the crisp springtime breeze. Feel the late afternoon sun warming his back, though not as much as his Alpha’s voice warmed his heart.

If he tried hard enough, Jensen could almost believe he was back there, instead of facing his imminent death in a place too dark to identify, without the love of his life.

And that really was the crux of it. Jensen had been ready for Death since he was 8 years old…but now? With Jared in his life? With Jared, and Chris, and Chad, and the pack, and Eric, and his brother and his friends? He had more to live for than ever.

It would figure that Fate would wait until he had the most to lose, before pulling the rug from under his feet.

Overwhelmed with a volatile combination of frustration and desperation, Jensen began to thrash against his bonds, not stopping when it tore his skin open, or when his body began to scream from its self-inflicted abuse. He didn’t stop when he realized he was gulping in great, gasping sobs, and he didn’t stop when shivers seemed to rack his very insides.

He only stopped when blackness floated into his awareness. Laying in a fetal position, his overheated skin pressed against the damp, cold concrete, he let himself slip away.

Maybe his subconscious would take pity on him, and take him back to that day.

~*Jared*~

“Who would betray us like that?” Chad asked, his normally playful brother gone, replaced with an
agitated, worried friend.

They had just sent Josh home with the promise that they’d meet back up in the morning to look again, having come up empty searching for Jensen. The wolves were at a loss; Chad was turning things over verbally, his anxiety almost palpable in the tension-thickened air. Chris was quiet, sheer desperation pouring off him in waves. And Jared?

Jared was simply lost.

He was an alpha. A Pack Alpha. A natural born leader, fearless and quick thinking, tactical and powerful and strong. He wasn’t supposed to be lost. He wasn’t supposed to be afraid, and uncertain. He was supposed to have the answers.

And yet.

It was like Jensen had taken with him, the parts of Jared that made him the best Alpha heir he’d ever been. Here was the tangible proof that Jared was better when his mate was at his side; he was stronger, more self-assured, more dominant, more Alpha.

And he finally had an answer to Beaver’s question.

“Jared!”

The Alpha’s attention was redirected to his best friend. Chad was glaring at him, having apparently been speaking to him for the past few minutes. Whatever his second-in-command had seen in his eyes, though, softened his expression. Clear blue eyes locked on Jared’s hazel.

“Get out of that place, Jay. We’re going to find him. You cant help him when you’re catatonic.”

Nodding slowly, Jared forced himself to at least try to push past his crushing terror. The sun hung low in the sky, and he allowed his eyes to track the sky while he thought.

“We’ll stay at a motel for the night,” he finally ordered the other two wolves, settling back into his role as their leader, even though it felt tonight like more of a burden than a privilege. “I’ll meet you guys there; I need to speak to someone first. Just in case, by some twist of Fate, it was humans who took him.”

“You don’t know anyone here,” Chad pointed out, a counterpoint to Chris nodding knowingly.

“I know some people,” Jared told his friend solemnly. “All of whom would do anything for…for him.” Jared avoided speaking his mate’s name, knowing that the tears wouldn’t stop if he did.

It was time to revisit JR’s world.

###

Everyone at the bar greeted him like an old friend, even though most of them knew him as only “the guy that was with JR”. Again, Jared had to marvel at the pull his mate had; enough to make Jared feel at home at a biker bar, when the green-eyed boy wasn’t even there. As opposed to their first meeting, Tyler Hoechlin even offered to buy him a drink, insisting that a round was on him next time Jared and Jensen were in town.

“J-Ross has that effect on people.”

Jared turned at the sound of Aldis’ voice, managing to muster up an extremely fake smile for the
man, which he saw right through.

“What’s the matter kid?” Then Aldis realized which part of the duo was noticeably absent. “Where’s JR?”

Jared didn’t answer for a moment.

“Where’s JR, kid?” Aldis repeated, alarm making him straighten. Suddenly, the lean man pulled Jared outside by the elbow. The Alpha moved willingly, remembering Jensen’s insistence that the bar’s patrons jumped at any sign of weakness.

“He’s been taken, Dodge,” Jared pushed the words out as soon as they were outside. “A few hours ago, as he was leaving his uncle’s place. I think it may have been his aunt, she blames him for his parent’s car accident.”

The other man was silent as he digested the overload of information, his palms shaking slightly where he brought them up to scrub at his face.

“Where was the last place he was at?” Aldis asked finally, a dangerous glint entering his eyes. “I’ll call up the boys, we’ll check around.” The tall man regarded him for a moment, head cocked. “Do you have any idea of who might have taken him?”

Jared swallowed hard against the lie. “No.”

Thankfully, being able to read people was more Jensen’s thing, because Aldis accepted the answer with a tired nod. Concern tightened the older man’s eyes, and rage tightened his fists. “I’ll make a couple calls,” he told Jared, clapping him on the shoulder. “Thanks for keeping me in the loop. I’ll call you if I hear anything.”

“I’ll do the same.”

They exchanged numbers quickly, and it seemed that Jensen’s absence weighed heavily on both of their socializing skills, because Aldis accepted the answer with a tired nod. Concern tightened the older man’s eyes, and rage tightened his fists. “I’ll make a couple calls,” he told Jared, clapping him on the shoulder. “Thanks for keeping me in the loop. I’ll call you if I hear anything.”

“You’re religious, Jay?”

Jared glanced down at his mate. Curious green eyes searched his face and he grinned, overwhelmed with happiness at having the beautiful boy in his arms.

“My momma raised us all to be,” he nodded the affirmative, turning to face Jensen and running his hand lightly over the curve of his back. “What about you?”

“Not for a while,” Jensen cringed. “I’m not an atheist either, I just sort of…I don’t know, I guess I’ve just had a hard time believing.”

Jared thought about that for a moment. Given Jensen’s history and what the boy had endured, it was more than reasonable for him to have some doubts. Pressing feathery kisses over his freckled skin, Jared strove to comfort.

“I’ll believe enough for the both of us,” he decided, “until you believe again. Okay?”
Jensen smiled winningly at him, and the Alpha’s heart skipped a beat in his chest.

“This is why I love you, Jared Padalecki.”

The words echoed tauntingly in his mind, a harsh and cruel reminder that someone out there had the power to make certain he never that honeysuckle voice and those sweet words again. There would be no greater hell than to lose his mate, and his traitorous mind kept coming back to the very real threat that loomed above his head.

The shrill ringing of his cellphone interrupted his thoughts. He scrambled, hoping against hope that Jensen had somehow managed to get out, or somehow managed to contact him from wherever he was.

“Jen…”

“No kid,” Beaver’s voice interrupted him before he could even get his mate’s full name out. Jared slumped in his seat, tears burning the back of his eyelids.

“What?” he asked dully.

“Chad called to let us know what was going on,” Jim told him, getting straight to the point. “Your daddy’s chomping at the bit, there’s that treaty meet that…”

“I don’t give a damn,” Jared retorted sharply. “And you should know better than to think I would. Now if that’s all you called to tell me…”

“Don’t mouth off with me, boy,” Beaver warned, though there was a distinct note of warmth in his gruff tone. “I know you don’t care, and frankly, I don’t think the rest of the pack does either. We had to talk a lot of them out of coming out there to help you, until we could speak to you about it. Your boy’s made quite an impression on them.”

Swiping impatiently at the tears rolling down his cheeks, Jared huffed a flat laugh that held next to no real mirth. “He has that effect on people,” he repeated Aldis’ words. “Send a few of them that can be spared…the sooner we can cover ground, the faster we’ll find him.”

The words went unsaid: And we will find him.

“You got it, kid,” Jim replied gently. “I’ve been thinking…tell me again about that nightmare you had.”

“You think it’ll help me find him?” he asked shrewdly, sitting up in his seat, eager to grab hold of any shred of hope available to him. “The nightmares?”

“I think that they may have some significance, yes,” Jared could almost picture Jim’s nodding, “but I also think that it may be the key to finding him.”

“How so?”

“Well, your relationship with him has already proven to have all the qualities of a traditional mating, albeit exacerbated. In my experience, Were mates have the ability to sense when their significant others are in danger, and they also have a stronger mental connection during this time. With the kinds of emotions running rampant between you and Jensen, I have reason to believe that you might be able to connect to him telepathically, over a wider search radius.”

Jared’s breath caught in his throat. “I need to shift,” he mumbled, getting out of the truck. “That’s the
only time when we…”

“Jared, wait,” Beaver stopped him. “Tell me about the nightmare first.”

“We were in some dark, abandoned, rundown place that smelled like rotting fish, and I was running down a corridor until I found him in one of the rooms,” he summarized quickly. “Maybe an old factory that produced something in the line of fish?”

“Abandoned factories,” Jim snorted. “You’d think they’d at least try not to make it like a bad remake of an already awful horror movie.”

Jared couldn’t bring himself to joke around as though everything was normal and thankfully, the older wolf seemed to realize as much without him having to say so. A comfortable silence fell over them as Jared was treated to the distant sound of Jim’s fingers falling over a keyboard, each click-clacking stroke bringing him closer to finding his mate.

“Okay,” Jim eventually spoke again. “There are four factories that went out of business around that area, kid, but…” the Chemistry professor’s voice broke with a sigh. “None of them have anything to do with fish. There’s two herbicide companies, an auto-spares manufacturer and a toffee factory.”

Jared bit back his frustration, locking his car and running into the small area of seclusion that the trees offered. “Widen your search span or something,” he instructed the older wolf before he really registered it. “They could have run or taken a vehicle. Call me back when you have an update, I’m going to try to connect with Jen.”

There was a beat before Beaver responded. “You’re gonna make a damn fine Alpha, kid,” he offered gently, before hanging up. Jared warmed fractionally at the faith his pack had in him; and he knew for a fact that he wouldn’t be as imposing and confident in his abilities if not for Jensen’s unyielding faith in him.

Faith that he had to justify by getting his mate back.

He shifted flawlessly, his mind reaching out for Jensen before his paws even touched the rich, earthy soil. Padding a few feet in every which direction, Jared inwardly urged his mate to answer to his calls.

There was a brief flavor of something…it was definitely his mate, but he couldn’t connect with him. Jared kept pushing, knowing that this likely meant that the green-eyed boy was either too far out, or asleep. Or unconscious, his unhelpful mind provided.

After a few more minutes, Jared gave it a rest, resolving to try again in a half hour. Shifting back to human form, he called Beaver back, informing the older alpha about the recent developments and smirking slightly over the fact that he couldn’t do that with his own father.

No sooner had he hung up before his phone was ringing again, this time with his brother on the other end.

“How ya holding up, kiddo?” his brother forewent the pleasantries, deep concern in his voice. For a second, Jared felt like he was a pup again, and he ached for his brother to chase away the nightmares in that way that only a big brother could. He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat that hadn’t seemed to have left since Jensen was taken.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, Jeff,” he confessed in a small voice, sounding a lot like the lost pup
he felt like. “I don’t…”

“Shh, little brother,” Jeff instantly soothed, his deep and calm voice taking Jared back to his childhood. “It’s gonna be okay. We’re gonna find him, I promise. I told Val what was going on, and I’ve already left home, I’ll be there in an hour. I’m gonna help you figure this out, okay?”

Overwhelming gratitude fell over him, tugging at his already frayed emotions. “Thanks,” he whispered softly, knowing that his older brother would hear what he couldn’t say; that he loved him for the support, and that he couldn’t face this alone, and that he was thankful to have Jeff as his family.

“It’s going to be okay,” the elder Padalecki promised simply, proving that he heard every last unspoken word. “I promise.”

Jared nodded, accepting the promise, because what else could he possibly do? Leaving his truck parked where it was, he walked around aimlessly, desperately trying to think of any type of solace he could seek from the turmoil churning his insides.

*You’re religious, Jay?*

*I’ll believe enough for the both of us, until you believe again. Okay?*

His own words echoed in his mind and with a start, he realized that his absently moving feet had brought him to the front steps of a catholic church they had passed earlier.

*I’ll believe enough for the both of us.*

Walking up the steps, he slipped into the opulent church, too distraught to even appreciate it’s magnificent beauty. Kneeling down at the front of the chapel, eyes fixed on the flickering candle he had lit, Jared prayed for guidance, for direction.

*Please…keep him safe for me. Don’t let me lose him, not now, not like this, not…not ever. Please…please, please, please. He’s mine, he’s my soul-mate, You can’t have him yet. I don’t want to imagine facing a future without him. Please give us a chance.*

He crossed himself, letting his tears fall; honestly, he was surprised that he could still cry, for all the sobbing he’d already done. Wasn’t there some kind of limit on that? If there was, the Alpha was sure he would have passed it by now.

Crossing the street into the woods-y area off the main road, Jared shifted once more. *Jen?* He called out, desperation tinged his tone. *Baby, please, please…can you hear me? Jensen?*

He shut his eyes, pressing his muzzle to the ground with a pitiful whimper, full of anger and desperation. All of a sudden, it felt like his mind was being wrapped in cotton wool, and he found himself- his human self- back in the corridor in his dream.

*How did he fall asleep?*

Confusion struck momentary fear into him, and he walked slowly down the abandoned hallway, moving to the door he knew Jensen to be behind. Turning the knob slowly, he opened the door…

*…to find his mate.*

“Jay?” Jensen’s disbelieving voice was the most beautiful sound he’d heard all day, and he found he didn’t really care how he had managed to fall asleep; this dream was well worth it.
In four big strides, he was in front of his mate, scooping him up into his arms and showering him with kisses. He was grateful that he could touch in whatever odd dream world he’d created.

“Jay?” his mate asked again, pulling back slightly. “What are you…how did you…how’d you get into my dream?”

Jared was still for a moment, his eyes widening as he caught on to the implications of what his mate was saying. “This is…this is your dream, baby?”

Jensen nodded, looking confused. “Yeah. I know it is, because I’m not…” he cut off abruptly, averting his eyes. Reaching over, Jared tilted his lover’s face to meet his.

“You’re not, what?” Jensen sighed in resignation.

“I’m not hurt, here.”

“Oh, love…”

Jared buried his face in Jensen’s neck, those four simple words flooring him. Part of him, a decidedly masochistic part, wanted to demand that his mate detail all of his injuries, while another more dominant part of him simply wanted to hold and touch and comfort and caress, and apologize until his throat was raw.

Like he could read his mind, which wasn’t unlikely at this stage, Jensen carded his hands through Jared’s locks, soothing him. “It’s okay, babe, everything’s okay here. Shh…”

“I’m so sorry, love,” he clutched tighter at his boyfriend. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there, I’m sorry I can’t find you now…”

“Jay, it’s okay.” Jensen pulled back to aim earnest green eyes at him. “I’m so glad I get to see you now. Can you enter my dreams because we’re mates too?”

Jared shook his head, uncaring of the semantics now. “I don’t know what this is, baby,” he admitted. “I’ll tell Beaver about it, he might be able to shed some light.”

“Jay.” Jen shook his head, seeming to remember something. “I need to tell you something…about where I am? I can smell rotted fish wherever I am, but I don’t think I’m near a harbor or anything because I don’t smell or hear water.”

“I know.” Jared nodded, cringing guiltily. “I had a nightmare about this…I didn’t know it was prophetic baby,” his voice turned pleading. “I thought that I could…if I’d had any idea…I’m…”

Jensen shut him up with a chaste but loving kiss. “Hush, Jay.” He wiped away the tears rolling from Jared’s eyes. “You weren’t to know, and in my experience, you can’t escape Fate.”

Jared nodded, slowly steeling himself. He cupped the other boy’s neck, caressing the curve of his jaw. “Jen, do you remember anything about where they took you? I’m close enough to connect, which means you haven’t left town.”

“It has to be some sort of factory,” Jensen reasoned, looking around. “I can hear lights flickering too, so I’d wager it’s a factory that…”

“…came out of business,” Jared finished with a nod. “Tried that route already.” Desperation tinged his tone. “All we got was two old herbicide companies, a toffee factory and…”
“That’s it…” Jensen mouthed, barely audible as his green eyes opened wide with realization. “That’s it!” he exclaimed excitedly. “I’m an idiot! I’m at one of the herbicide factories!”

“But which one?” Jared asked, a burst of hope renewing him, too excited to ask how Jensen had figured it out. His mate bit his lip, racking his brain.

“I don’t know,” he whispered in anguish. “I didn’t hear anything else, except…” his voice trailed off, and he looked to Jared suddenly, the excitement returning. “Jay, do you remember that time you were telling me all about your weird facts? You mentioned that some churches rang their bells at certain intervals?”

“Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican churches, yeah,” Jared nodded, and like a freight train, the epiphany hit him. “You heard that 6pm bell ring, didn’t you?” he asked elatedly.

Jensen nodded animatedly. “I think so! I dismissed it before, but I think there’s a church nearby where I am.”

Jared scooped his lover up into his arms once more, spinning him around with a laugh. Overwhelming relief showered through him and he thanked whatever power may have listened to his prayers, for giving him this.

~*Jensen*~

It's a cruel twist of Fate that I might have managed to give Jared my location, only for him to come in time to find my body.

The thought ran unbidden through Jensen’s mind, and he shivered in residual fear. There was still a great chance that Jared wouldn’t get to him in time, and while part of him wanted to stay hopeful, he felt the need to protect Jared in the same vein, not wanting his lover to have to see his dead body.

“Jay?” it was difficult to see the sheer delight on his Alpha’s face, knowing there was a chance there would be devastation soon. “Just…just let Chris come into my room first, okay?”

Hurt flashed on the taller boy’s face, combined with a healthy dose of suspicion. “Why?” he asked simply.

Jensen winced. He couldn’t bear to face death knowing that Jared remained insecure about his feelings, so he picked the lesser of the two evils. Framing the wolf’s face with his palms, Jensen kept his voice low and sweet. “Jay…babe, we have to face the possibility that…that they’ll do something to me before you get there.” Jared started to protest, pain ravaging his hazel orbs, but Jensen overrode him. There was no way he could get this out again. He had to blurt everything out now. “She’s hell-bent on revenge. She might not want to wait much longer before she…before she finishes this.” He couldn’t actually say the words; even thinking them felt painful. “If she does…I don’t want you to see that, Jay. Please, promise me.”

“No.” Desolation radiated off the Alpha Were. “No, I can’t, I won’t.”

“Jay…” Unable to hold back his own tears, Jensen buried his face in Jared’s chest. “I’ll hold on,” he promised. “I’ll stall and I’ll fight, I promise I’ll do my best…but don’t do you dare give up if something happens to me.” Ardent green eyes sought out despairing hazel ones. “Promise me.” He shook his boyfriend lightly. “Promise me that you’ll become the Pack Alpha, and you’ll find a Beta,
and you’ll see me again only in 80-odd years. *Promise* me, Jared.”

Before anything could happen, before Jared could protest and Jensen could plead, the foundation around them rocked dangerously.

“What…” Jensen’s bewildered tone became a short gasp when he fell backwards, out of Jared’s arms. “I’m waking up,” he comprehended as pain began to return to his dream-body.

Jared opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, everything went dark.

And with a breathy gasp, Jensen returned to awareness. Coughing violently, he realized that he’d woken because the other wolf- Gabe, Jensen remembered Katherine calling him- had sucker-punched his already aching ribs.

“It’s time, boy,” he stated, his tone and the implications in his words sending chills down Jensen’s spine.

He tried to reason with the man in front of him. “You don’t have… to do this,” he pushed the words out. “I didn’t kill…your mate.” It was ironic that even as he pleaded for the man before him to see sense, he knew that it wasn’t going to happen. He knew that if the positions were reversed, he’d tear limb from limb anyone who was remotely involved or related to Jared’s death.

“You’re the reason he’s gone!” Gabe snarled, proving his own suspicion. “A mate for a mate,” he breathed heavily. “The Padalecki heir is going to go through his entire life knowing that he failed to save his mate, the same way I must go through my life.” All Jensen could see in the man’s eyes was malice, and he shuddered at the evidence of what losing a mate could do.

Would Jared become something like this if he lost him? Would he become cold to the world, merciless and unforgiving and ruthless? Would he teach his heirs the same hateful ideals?

Would he lose that sparkle in his eyes, the kindness and gentleness in his soul that made him the man he was?

Invariably.

*Fight*, a voice inside him urged, sounding suspiciously like a voice he remembered from his childhood, but couldn’t really place. *Fight, son. If not for you, then for him.*

“Do what…you feel you must,” Jensen wheezed. He knew that goading the man was the only possible stalling technique he had left. “But face me…like a man. The way…that Joe faced us.” He forced a smirk on to his face. “Are you as brave…as your mate *used* to be?”

With a roar, Gabe punched the wall just above his face, and it was with considerable effort that Jensen kept his smug exterior.

“This town will be painted with your blood,” Gabe vowed dangerously, “before I deliver your head on a stick to your precious mate.”

“Fantastic,” Jensen deadpanned, turning to sarcasm in his intense fear.

*Fun fucking times.*

###
Please leave me some love and let me know what you thought! <3
Several things happened at once. With an almost audible snap, Jared returned to reality, and at the same moment that he begun to feel the earth against his muzzle once more, he was suddenly tackled from the side.

Rolling with the heavy form on top of him, Jared snapped his teeth, trying to gather his bearings. As soon as he was pinned down, a familiar paw against his belly, he stopped struggling.

Jeff?

*What in the hell happened to you?* His brother growled at him, nipping his ear like he was a disobedient pup. *Do you really think we have the time to waste with you disappearing, Jared? We have our hands full with Jensen, without you pulling a temper tantrum and worrying us even more!*

Rebellious of the unwarranted dressing-down he was getting, Jared bucked his brother off him, years of wrestling with the older wolf having taught him a trick or two. In a quick move, he had their positions reversed, pinning his brother down with a matching ear nip, albeit slightly harder than his brother had done to him.

*I connected with Jen,* he informed the elder Padalecki irritably. *You should know better than to think I would put my mate’s safety in jeopardy by breaking down.*

His brother looked chagrined, and Jared watched as the fear chipped away from Jeff’s eyes. The Alpha heir relaxed his grip, jumping to the side to allow his brother to get back up, realizing that despite their snapping, Jeff was concerned for Jared’s safety too. He butted his muzzle against Jeff’s apologetically.

*I’m okay,* he reassured his older brother. *How long was I AWOL?*

*Two hours, according to Chad.* Jeff answered his unspoken apology by licking the spot on Jared’s
ear where he’d nipped him earlier, in a way that Jared recognized as something Jeff did to his pups. He smothered a smile at the fatherly side of his brother. They’ve been anxious.

I’ll apologize later, the Alpha quickly remembered the urgency they needed to be moving with. We don’t have a lot of time. I know where Jensen is. Jared didn’t need to communicate with Jeff to see the clear question in the other alpha’s eyes. I’ll explain the how, later, he promised. But he doesn’t have a lot of time. Jared ran the risk of exposure by howling loudly, the sound guaranteed to reach the ears of his packmates. He just hoped Jensen’s captors didn’t hear it too.

Within a few minutes, Chad and Chris arrived, each rebuking him for his disappearing act. Before he could explain why, he was surprised to find six other wolves crowding them. Jared immediately recognized Tom and Misha, the only two betas, as well as Daniel, the father of the Jensen’s favorite triplet pups. It took him an extra minute, but he quickly identified the other three alphas, Jack, Ben and Pascal, as the fathers of other pups Jen had gotten close to, and babysat.

Jared, Daniel nodded at him. We’re here to help. Do you want us to split up and search, see if we can track Jensen?

No, Daniel, Jared responded, pawing the loose soil underneath his paws. I have Jensen’s location, the only issue now is conducting a retrieval mission.

Ben stepped forward, his head bowed slightly in a show of respect to the pack Alpha; the Alpha Jared realized he’d started sounding like. It made him start slightly, since he’d only ever seen that gesture directed at his father, and Beaver’s voice ran through his head. You’re gonna make a damn fine Alpha, kid.

Jared was brought back to the present as Ben straightened. Like he’d seen his father do many times, Jared dipped his head fractionally in acknowledgement and mutual respect.

We’d be honored to help, Jared, Ben assured him.

I’d understand if anyone were hesitant, Jared made himself speak gently. You are all fathers and sons and brothers. I don’t expect you to risk your lives for my mate, I can’t ask you to...

You’re not asking, Jack interrupted him. Yet here we stand.

Daniel stepped forward this time. Jensen is our family too, Jared. He became my family the moment he saved my pups that day in the field. He’s integrated himself into my family with every second he spent looking after Lukas, Liam and Layla since.

Same here, Jack echoed.

And here, Ben and Pascal chimed in unison.

From his side, Chad butted his muzzle against Jared’s side. He’s been my family since he schooled me in pool that day, the sandy wolf huffed an approximation of a laugh. And since the day he told me he believed in me, in the way only you ever seemed to before.

He was my family since the day he told me he loved my baby brother, Jeff nodded at him. He’s my brother-in-law, Jare.

And he’s my brother, Chris was the last one to speak. From everyone, Jared knew that Chris was the one who was feeling Jensen’s abduction the most, next to him. Jared nodded once at the other alpha; he didn’t need the words, because he knew without a shadow of doubt that he’d have to paralyze Chris if he had any hope of the alpha not accompanying him to find Jensen.
Everyone else though? He had no idea how much Jensen had integrated himself into so many families, into so many hearts. He didn’t think his mate even knew how many lives he’d touched.

*He has that effect on people.*

Jared huffed, a small tendril of warmth curling in his frozen chest. He had the most amazing mate in the world.

And it was time to rescue him.

~*Jensen*~

The sound of his ragged breathing filled the otherwise empty room. Clutching his abdomen against the pain that seemed to thud in time with his heartbeat, Jensen staggered to his feet, meeting his attacker head-on.

“You keep getting up,” Gabe taunted him, a sneer twisting the features that might have looked handsome a long time ago. Before grief had taken over, and anger, and hatred. “You’d think after so many times you’d learn to stay down.”

Despite the bruises marring his skin and the blood pouring from a cut above his left eye, despite the fatigue of his broken body and the heat radiating from his extensive injuries, Jensen lifted his chin fractionally, the picture of unyielding defiance.

“Someone...once told me that I...was the strongest and bravest person...he had ever known,” Jensen forced the words out of his mouth, wheezing painfully. The picture of his lover, of Jared, sprung to the forefront of his mind; he saw the bright smile, mischievous eyes and ever-adorable dimples. He saw the floppy hair that more often than not refused to abide by the laws of gravity, and the tall and muscular body that made him feel safer than safe and hotter than hot. He even saw that faint scar on the curve of a shoulder that spoke of a lifetime of childhood memories with Chad as a best friend. It reminded him of what he had to fight for. What he had to lose. “I’m fighting...for him,” he said, with the quiet conviction of a warrior. Through the blood that painted his face, his eyes glowed, bright green and fierce, with a spirit that only true love can cultivate. “I fight...for him...because he’s...my heart and soul. I have no fear...anymore...because he’s with me. I can look...Death in the face...and fear nothing...when I have him.”

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“Look around you, pretty boy.” The man cracked his knuckles. “Your precious mate ain’t here. You’re all alone.”

“You’re nought for two.” Jensen shook his head painfully. “He’s the...purest...and best part...of me. And I’m never...alone. Not as...as long as I have...his love.”

Jensen watched as realization dawned on Gabe’s face. The wolf dropped his stance, straightening, an iron mask coming over his features.

“Then the only way to end this is to take away his love,” Gabe stated monotonously. “But not from you. Nothing would hurt you more than to be the reason for your mate’s pain.” Picking up the knife he had come in with fifteen minutes earlier, Gabe advanced on Jensen, deadly intent clear as day on his face. Finality made his eyes clear, and Jensen shivered.

But he didn’t retreat.
He didn’t close his eyes.

He faced Death without any fear, just as he said he would. All he felt was sorrow and pain, and overwhelming love for the man who had taught him what it meant to live, love and dream.

*I love you, Jared Tristan Padalecki, forever and always. I’m so sorry.*

~*Jared*~

His senses tingling, Jared directed his pack quickly. Jensen had spoken like they hadn’t a lot of time…and Jared knew from experience that his mate’s innate ability to read people wasn’t something to be taken lightly. If Jensen was worried…it was because he had reason to be.

“Chad, Chris, Jeff, Misha, you’re with me,” Jared instructed. “We’re going to find Jensen and take out whoever is guarding him. Tom, Daniel, Ben, Jack and Pascal, you’re going to find and take out Jensen’s aunt.” After a beat, he added, “I don’t want bloodshed tonight. Not here, not now. Subdue them, and then Jensen needs to have a say in how we handle this.”

Everyone nodded in compliance, and Jared liked to think that it wasn’t only because of his Alpha timbre. In Jeff’s eyes, shone a rare mix of intense pride and respect. Jared shifted forms easily, landing on his paws, and they all followed suit.

As soon as he was in lupine form, Jared smelt Jensen’s scent. As heavenly a scent as it was, Jared’s stomach recoiled at how much blood was saturated in the normally piney, earthy aroma. Knowing his directives would be followed, the Alpha didn’t hesitate to move towards the smell, tracking his mate effortlessly. He rammed through a door and tumbled into a long corridor.

“Someone…once told me that I… was the strongest and bravest person…he had ever known.”

Jared started as the faint sound reached his sensitive ears, an echo of the words he had spoken to Jensen before that disastrous dinner with his family. He started to move quickly but silently down the passage, following the sound of his mate’s voice. Though it was pained, he basked in it, letting it drown out the sound of his pack brothers’ padding paws.

“I’m fighting…for him,” Jensen was saying, warming Jared’s icy chest. “I fight…for him…because he’s…my heart and soul. I have no fear…anymore…because he’s with me. I can look…Death in the face…and fear nothing…when I have him.”

Jared could hardly describe the feelings that were coursing through him in that moment, so potent were they. He was so incredibly proud of his lover, and so honored that Jensen thought of him in a way he’d only ever dreamt of being seen as.

“Look around you pretty boy. Your precious mate aint here. You’re all alone.”

_That’s where you’re wrong, you son of a bitch_, Jared thought, wanting to growl at the very sound of the man who had caused his lover hurt. He turned a corner sharply, his pace picking up the closer he got to Jensen.

“You’re nought for two.” Jared was indescribably happy that his mate disputed that comment, knew in his heart of hearts that Jared would never leave him like that. “He’s the…purest…and best part…of me. And I’m never…alone. Not as…as long as I have…his love.”
The Alpha pushed back a whimper, Jensen’s raw and unfiltered words hitting his nerve endings in the way his only ever could. He felt reverence for his mate, ached to worship and cherish and treasure him.

“Then the only way to end this is to take away his love,” the unknown wolf decided, and Jared heard the sickening finality in his tone. He pushed harder, downright running now, the voices getting closer and closer and yet somehow still feeling so out of reach. He wasn’t listening to their words anymore, but one thing he couldn’t block out, was the voice that suddenly manifested in his head.

_I love you, Jared Tristan Padalecki, forever and always. I’m so sorry._

Ice spread over Jared’s body and he focused on that voice, on that love, on that scent of his precious, significant other. Finally-_finally_- he reached the door that he knew held his Jensen, and he barely felt it when he crashed through it.

He was met with a picture he knew would be forever imprinted on his mind, until the end of days. The wolf was in his human form, and Jared saw various injuries littering his frame; pride burst through him when he recognized Jensen’s handiwork. His mate had fought back. What gave Jared pause, however, was the man’s stance…where he was poised to plunge a knife deep into Jensen’s chest. His mate was bruised and battered; his face and body were covered in blood and there were more injuries on his body than there was not. But even hurt to hell and flirting with death, Jensen’s face was a picture of love and serenity.

Snapping his jaws, a vicious snarl ripped through Jared’s teeth. In a motion quicker than he could have anticipated, the man had Jensen’s body in front of his, knife to his throat.

“Don’t come any closer,” he warned, a maniacal glint in his eyes. Jared growled dangerously, crouching low, and when Chris and Chad flanked him and Misha and Jeff took up the rear, he knew their positions mirrored his.

“Give…it up…” Jensen wheezed, and the Alpha cringed at the sound. Irrefutable proof of Jensen having internal injuries. “They’re…stronger than you…Gabe.”

The man- Gabe- shook his head vehemently. “No!” he screamed. “You’re all going to pay for taking my Joe away from me! You’re gonna pay!”

“Joe attacked me…first,” Jensen rasped, and Jared realized quickly that the lone wolf who had attacked Jensen was actually part of the trio. “Ever wondered…what made him do…something that impulsive?”

The atmosphere in the already tense room dropped a couple degrees as Gabe sliced across Jensen’s throat, a barely-there scratch but enough to draw blood. Jensen sucked in a breath through his teeth and Jared growled warningly, feeling desperation and potent rage incite his veins.

“Stop baiting me,” Gabe hissed, “and tell me what you know.”

His mate was struggling on his feet, his injuries impeding him, and Jared took advantage of Gabe’s distraction to start inching gradually closer. He locked eyes with Jensen and dipped his head, so slightly that he knew only Jensen would catch on to it, and the acknowledgement showed in stunning emerald orbs.

“Why don’t you…ask Katherine?” he wheezed, shifting ever so slightly to the left. To anyone else, it would have looked like he was trying to find a more comfortable position, or like he was moving away from the knife, but Jared saw it as the action it was; one that removed Jared almost fully from
Gabe’s line of sight, and one that allowed him a larger freedom of movement without tipping the knife-wielding madman off.

_Good job, baby, you’re amazing. It’s my turn now. Trust me._

Jared saw the warmth in Jensen’s eyes, and this time, he didn’t need telepathy to see the total trust Jensen had in him. Exacerbated mental connection aside, he could read those orbs like a book.

“She tried to stop him,” Gabe retorted, but it wasn’t difficult to pinpoint the uneasiness in his tone. “She told me herself that she tried to keep him from making a move without me.”

“How’d you ever…wondered…why she had…more of a vendetta…against…against me than…the wolf y’all were…targeting?”

As Jensen spoke, Jared continued inching forward slowly. He knew where his mate was taking this, and he hoped to God that Gabe would bite.

“Didn’t you wonder…why Joe attacked…me that day?” Jensen continued. “Killing me was…never the plan…was it? You were…going to use me as…as bait, to get…get him here.”

“Why would Katherine want you dead?” Gabe demanded. “She was fighting the same cause as us! She knew that we were going to offer you the opportunity to change! She knew that killing you would be our last resort!”

Confusion struck Jared momentarily, but he trusted his mate to explain it to him when they got out of this. Instead of getting side-tracked, he kept moving forward, mind-speaking to his pack at the same time about not getting distracted by Gabe and Jensen’s back and forth.

“No,” Jensen refuted. “She knew that…killing me would…be easiest when…she had y’all to…to help.” He took in a painful, rattling breath, which was cut short with a gasp of pain. “She’s the…reason…he’s dead,” his mate forced the words out. “Not me.”

“No!” Gabe roared, and Jared took advantage of the man’s diverted attention.

_Duck, baby!_ He warned his mate before leaping in one large bound. Like a well-oiled machine, Jensen worked with him, dropping to the floor mere seconds before Jared rammed into Gabe.

Then, all hell broke loose.

Gabe shifted as they both fell. As he got back to his feet, Jared made sure to position himself in front of his mate. Behind him, Jensen’s hand touched his fur briefly, and the contact calmed him marginally.

He bared his teeth at the charcoal black wolf. Gabe mirrored the motion, his eyes darting between all of them, no doubt wondering whether he had any chance of escaping five bloodthirsty wolves who all loved the man he’d spent the past 17 hours torturing.

Unfortunately, the man was more kamikaze than any of them had anticipated.

With a harsh bark, the other wolf leaped…but not at Jared.

He rammed himself against an old, rusty machine. A minute too late, Jared realized that it was a crane-like mechanism…and it still had a load.

With a droning creak, the already ruined crane arm snapped, hurtling down. The long arm would
crush Gabe on its way down, but it was also in direct line with Jensen.

As it fell, Jared was in motion, and a split second before it could crush Jensen, he managed to push his mate away by slamming into him with his body.

He wasn’t so naïve to think he could scurry out of the way in time.

The last thing he remembered was the crushing pain of iron breaking his body.

And then, it was dark.

~*Jensen*~

“NO!”

Jensen watched in horror as the iron load fell on to Jared. Without even being fully aware of what he was doing, he crawled to where his fallen lover was.

Jeff was quicker than he was. With frantic motions that mirrored the feelings in Jensen’s chest, he shifted, and began tugging at the heavy arm, trying to heave it off Jared’s crumpled form. A split second later, Chad and Misha joined him, while Chris ran to him, grim-faced.

“Jensen, we need to…”

“No!” Jensen growled. He knew Chris meant well, but he needed to get to his mate, see that he was okay. “No, I have to make sure Jared… I have to... I need... he’s…”

“It’s over, Jensen,” Chris told him, his features twisted with grief and compassion. “He’s…”

“Shut the fuck up, Kane!” Jensen knew that his friend didn’t deserve his tone, but he didn’t really care at that moment. “He’s okay, he just... he needs to get out from under there.”

With strength that Jensen didn’t know he possessed, he pushed Chris out of the way and stumbled back to where Jared had finally been freed from the wreck.

The look of desolation on Jeff’s face made his heartbeat stutter.

His legs gave out and he crawled the last few inches between him and his mate. Jared had shifted in his unconsciousness, and with shaky hands, Jensen pressed two fingers to his lover’s throat.

He sobbed when he felt the faint pulse underneath the pads of his fingers.

“Call an ambulance!” he barked gruffly at them, furious that they were just standing there as though Jared was... as if he had...

“Jensen…”

“Call them!” he snarled dangerously, not even aware of who was trying to talk.

“Not even a wolf can heal from that, Jensen.” It was Jeff’s broken voice, ringing with finality, that crashed through Jensen’s urgency. “It’s over, he…”
Unable to complete his sentence, the elder Padalecki broke down into sobs, falling to his knees.

“No,” Jensen mouthed, the agony tearing through his very soul. “No, he’s not…” He pressed his forehead against Jared’s, hands ghosting over his bloodied and broken body. “Jared, wake up,” he pleaded desperately. “Babe, come on, you have to…to wake up…”

There was no response.

The anguish built up inside Jensen, and it felt like it was burning him from the inside out. His breathing became sharp and choppy, more gasping than anything else, and he registered Chris and Chad’s grief-filled voices, telling him to breathe.

He shut his eyes against their voices, and harsh white burst into his awareness. The burning became more real, and he screamed against the torment, flashes of his mate, his lover, his life, painting the back of his eyelids. They came so fast he could hardly decipher them, but he felt the essence of the love of his life. When he was sure that he was finally going to spontaneously combust from the fire in his veins, everything suddenly turned white.

“Jensen, open your eyes.”

Hesitantly, he complied, looking around as he did. He was no longer in the herbicide factory, and he quickly realized that Jared’s damaged body still lay in front of him. Another sob tore through him and he crumpled, laying over Jared as his body was wracked with cries.

“Jensen, you need to focus.”

“Who are you?!” Jensen screamed, half-crazed, out of his mind with guilt and pain. “What do you want with us? Show yourself!”

A figure stepped into his line of sight. Jensen swiped roughly at his eyes, clearing the tears that were blurring his vision. He moved quickly in front of Jared, shielding his mate’s body with his own. Part of him knew how pointless it was, but he was going to die before he let anyone touch his Jared.

“Jensen, focus.” The man’s voice was authoritative, commanding, and Jensen imagined he must have had people falling to their feet obeying him, but he wasn’t one of them.

“Tell me who you are!” he demanded belligerently. He no longer had any care for caution; his mate…his lover…there was nothing to fight for if he had no Jared.

“That is not of import,” the man replied smoothly, but his vivid green eyes betrayed the grudging respect that he had for Jensen, for daring to rebel. “But if you wish to save your mate’s life, then you must focus.”

That caught his attention.

“What are you talking about?” he pressed, reaching out blindly for Jared’s hand. Even just that tiny bit of contact gave him strength.

“You can still save him,” the man told him. “I didn’t think it was possible, but you’ve convinced me.”

“How?”

“The way you shield his body, though he can no longer feel pain,” the man stared pointedly at the defensive stance Jensen had taken up. “That is a love more powerful than I have seen in long years,
young one.”

“We’re mates.”

“I know,” the man nodded. “But hear me when I say that your love is stronger than any mates’ I’ve ever seen.”

Jensen nodded slightly. He wasn’t really surprised by the knowledge...he knew what he felt for Jared, and it almost stood to reason that there could never be a love like theirs.

“How do I save him?” he asked, vulnerability seeping into his voice.

“Use the power that is inside of you, young one,” the man coached him gently. His green eyes glowed, almost unnaturally. “As the generations have become adulterated, so too has your own gift, but perhaps this love of yours can intensify that which is already there.”

“My gift?” Jensen shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“You have long-dormant power within you, Jensen Ackles,” he explained. “Not a lot, but possibly just enough to save your beloved.”

He stepped forward, reaching out. Jensen took the proffered hand without hesitation; he would risk anything to save Jared.

The mysterious man stepped around Jared’s body, kneeling on the opposite side, facing Jensen. With the utmost care, he placed Jen’s hands over Jared’s heart. The faintest of thumping thudded unevenly against his palm.

“Focus on your beloved,” his voice turned hypnotic, and Jensen’s eyes fell shut of their own accord. “Focus on your love for him, on the times you have smiled, and laughed, and loved. On the times that you have cried, and comforted, and fought. On the times you have grew together, evolved together, progressed together.”

Images flashed in front of his eyelids once again, but this time, Jensen could see it all. He saw them in the alleyway, where Jared had kissed him for the first time. He saw them in Jared’s truck, the night that he’d agreed to go out with him. He saw Jared finding his beaten body the day they had their first fight, and he saw Jared leave the house after they had just had their second. He saw himself making Jared and Chris breakfast as they reconciled. He saw Jared, Chris and Chad shift for the first time in front of him, and saw the way he was more worried about Jared than about the secret. He saw Jared standing steadfastly by him when he was JR. He saw the morning after they had finally mated, when Jared had slipped out of bed to try to make him breakfast, but not before he dropped a tender kiss to Jensen’s temple. He saw them wrapped together in front of Jared’s...in front of their future home. He saw Jared looking at him like he was the sun, the moon and the stars.

It was like a montage of their love.

“Jared...” he breathed without thinking.

“Ask them to give you strength, to give you the power to heal what has been so unjustly hurt.” The man’s voice was simply like a background noise by now, so intent was he on his mate, but he complied.

Without really even being certain who he was asking, Jensen repeated the plea.

“Now focus your own energy on him,” came the next instruction. “Weave your energy through him,
make it flow from your body into his, and see the way the particles revive the injuries in its wake.”

Jensen dredged every last atom of energy in his body and envisioned it flooding from his hands into Jared’s body. He began to weaken alarmingly, but he didn’t relent, just kept pushing himself harder and further. His body began to burn once more, but he pushed past the agony.

Underneath his flaming palms, came the blessed and powerful thump of Jared’s heart.

His eyes flew open and he gasped.

~*Jared*~

His eyes flew open and he gasped.

Sitting up instinctively, he cast his eyes desperately around himself. They were still in the factory, and he…

…wasn’t dead?

“Jay…”

The weak voice of his mate caught his attention, and he turned to see Jensen kneeling next to him, ashen-faced.

Relief flooded through him. He must have been able to push Jensen out of the way and evade the hunk of iron too.

Before he could rejoice in the victory, Jensen slumped over, eyes fluttering shut.

“Jensen!” he yelled, surging forward to catch his mate before he could hit his head. He laid Jensen gently on the floor, not wanting to lift him in case of his injuries, but before he could examine his mate’s body, he was bodily lifted from his position kneeling on the floor.

“Jeff?” he found himself crushed in his brother’s arms, and his mystified voice was muffled against Jeff’s chest. “What the hell are you doing? We need to check on Jensen.”

“You were…oh, God, Jared…you…” Jeff choked, and Jared realized with a start that his forever unruffled big brother was actually crying. Jeff hadn’t even cried when their father had all but banished him from the pack.

“Hey, hey, hey,” he tried to comfort his brother, confusion in his tone. “It’s okay, I’m okay, the iron missed me.”

“No it didn’t!” Jeff burst out. “It didn’t…”

Jared pushed away, holding his brother by his biceps to try to get his attention. “Jeff, what are you talking about?”

“You were dead, Jared.” The agonized whisper came from Chad. Jared’s head snapped to his best friend’s. “You were dead, and then Jensen broke down, and something happened, because he suddenly stopped sobbing and he screamed, and his eyes rolled back in his head until we could only see the white.”
At this, Jared dropped to his knees next to his still unmoving mate. He pushed Jensen’s hair back and tapped his cheek gently. “Wake up, baby,” he urged softly, his panic mounting when there was no response. “Jen?”

“There was this white light surrounding you two,” Chris took up the story, dropping to kneel on the other side of Jensen’s prone form. Jared vaguely registered Jeff grasping his shoulder and Chad thumping his back. “We couldn’t get close to either of you. Then suddenly, you both gasped, and the light went away, and you were…alive. Better.”

Jared looked down to see the tell-tale blood on his shirt. He patted his chest experimentally.

“Jensen…healed me?” he asked, perplexed. “How?”

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Jeff’s rough voice interrupted his daze. Jared watched as his brother pressed his fingers against Jensen’s throat. “His pulse is slow and unsteady. He needs help.”

Jared snapped out of his inaction, his heart picking up double time. “Chad, check that the other wolf is really dead, and then call an ambulance,” he directed, batting his brother’s hand away to feel for himself. “Jeff, call Beaver, explain everything that happened and tell him we need him here right the fuck now. Misha, find the other wolves and explain what happened, and make sure Katherine doesn’t get away. Chris, find some water, we need to clean away the blood and see if we can rouse him.”

Jared fought against his panic as everyone scrambled to follow his orders. The question was at the forefront of his mind; had something happened with that light? Something that offered Jensen Jared’s life, in exchange for his? Or was his mate simply succumbing to his injuries?

Chris returned with water in an old, battered bucket. Jared gently tore open Jensen’s shirt, wincing when he saw the extent of the abuse on his beautiful mate. Bruises and cuts marked every inch of his skin, some distinct boot marks showing through. He dipped the ruined t-shirt in water and began tenderly wiping the blood away from his mate’s face. Jared was partly relieved to see that the blood, although copious, was only coming from a cut above Jensen’s eye. A large bruise colored his jaw and temple, but that was the extent of the injuries to his head. His torso was a different story.

Jared knew his mate had broken ribs, he could feel the phantom pain in his own chest, but he was worried for the internal injuries Jensen had. He checked his lover’s pulse again; slower, this time, marginally.

“Chad, where’s that ambulance?” he barked without taking his eyes off Jensen. “Jeff?!”

“Hold on with the ambulance,” Jeff instructed. “Beaver’s fifteen minutes out. He says he’ll be able to help.”

The Alpha was torn for a moment. On the one hand, he trusted Jim with his life, but on the other hand…Jensen’s pulse was getting weaker by the minute. Who knew that they had fifteen to spare?

It felt like it would kill him to make the decision, but he finally resolved to wait for Jim. Pressing his face into Jensen’s now-clean neck, he breathed a small prayer.

Please, love…please hang on. For me. For us. You can’t do this. You can’t save me, only to make me watch you…watch you leave me.

When he finally lifted his tear-streaked face, it was to see that all the wolves had taken up a guard around them. They were standing in a circle around him and Jensen, the picture of protection, each of them poised to defend.
The sight made Jared proud, and he wished Jensen was awake and could see how much of a pack member he had become without even being Were.

It was the longest fifteen minutes of his life, and when Beaver finally got to them, Jared thought he could have either kissed the man in relief for coming to help, or shot him in anger for taking so long.

Grim-faced, the older alpha knelt in front of Jensen. He pushed Jared’s hands away from where they were resting, one on Jensen’s hip and the other cupping the side of his neck, ignoring the growl he was given in favor of beginning to check Jen’s injuries.

“He’s got several broken ribs, one uncomfortably close to piercing his lung,” Beaver reported worriedly. “A ruptured spleen, fractured wrist, broken collar bone, a wealth of cuts and bruises…”

Jared felt his stomach turn and he tried to force the nausea down. “What can we do to fix this?” he asked, focusing on the elder pack member’s face. “Jeff said you could help?”

Jim nodded. “I managed to develop a serum that will extract the healing properties that lie in your blood, in wolf blood. Theoretically, it should heal Jensen, since in werewolf matings, the blood of a mated couple can heal their injuries. It will only work with your blood, so we’ll need to draw a syringe right now.”

“Will it work with Jensen being human?” Jeff asked baldly.

Before Jared could snarl at his brother, Beaver nodded again. “It should. They’ve shown every other mating tendency, this shouldn’t be the exception.”

Jared thrust his arm out, offering his vein. “Do it.”

The wolves’ shield around them didn’t falter as Jim drew his blood. Pulling a bottle from his bag, he uncorked the stopper and dropped the blood into it. As soon as it hit the clear liquid, the concoction began to simmer, becoming scarlet. After a few beats, Jim drew the liquid into a new syringe, tapping it lightly before gently injecting it into Jen’s thigh.

“Please work,” Jared pleaded almost inaudibly. “Please work.”

After ten minutes, Jensen still hadn’t moved, but a cursory examination showed them that he had begun the healing process. Bruises were faded as though they were weeks old, and the lump his ruptured spleen had caused had all but disappeared.

“Why isn’t he waking up?” Chris managed to ask the question that Jared couldn’t force through his lips. His head snapped up to look at Beaver as he answered the question.

“Just his body’s way of coping with all the trauma,” they were assured. “It’s normal.”

Four days later, Jared was still sitting vigil next to Jensen, on the bed in Chris’ guest room.

His mate still hadn’t woken.
Whew! That was intense to write! Please don't hate me! X_X Next chapter, I promise, will be very redeeming!

Hope you guys enjoyed the intensity of this chapter and hope y'all won't give up on me after this!

Let me know what y'all thought!

-JayGirl
“Well, young one. It seems you might actually have a smidgen of promise.”

Jensen whirled around at the sound of the mysterious man. He bit back his knee-jerk sarcasm, bearing in mind that the man had helped him save Jared’s life.

“Thank you,” Jensen nodded, meeting green eyes. “For helping me save him,” he hastened to clarify.

He was rewarded for his gratitude with a slow nod. “You did well, young one,” the man offered, slightly softer now. “Not many could do what you did, with the little power you possessed.”

“I was hoping you could elaborate on that for me,” Jensen said wryly. “I’m incredibly confused right now.” He looked around himself, observing that he was back in whatever White Universe he’d come to before. “Where am I? How’d I even get here?”

“Must you start with the most difficult questions?” the man asked him, his tone betraying an affectionate exasperation. For some reason, Jensen was amused by the man’s vexation.

“How about we start with who you are?” he suggested, compromising in an offer of an olive branch.

The man nodded. “That seems…reasonable. My name is Rosen.”

“Rosen?” Jensen tried the name out, mildly pleased with how well it rolled off his tongue. “That’s a cool name. What does it mean?”

“It means ‘Ruler’, young one,” Rosen answered with a slight half-smile. “It is indeed…cool.”
Jensen chuckled dryly. “You’re not much into colloquialism, are you?”

“I don’t care for it, no,” Rosen grimaced. “It lacks a certain decorum.”

“Yeah,” Jensen snorted, “wait till you hear someone speak in a rap.”

“I presume from your tone that I wouldn’t like this…’rap’ language?”

“You presume correctly, seeing as how you think rapping is a different language.”

Jensen case his eyes speculatively over the man. Rosen didn’t seem very old; he seemed to be around Josh’s age, actually. His eyes were wide and vivid green, and his dirty blonde hair fell in a mop around his face. Small red dots painted across his eyes, curving around the top of one and crossing the bridge of his nose to get to the bottom of the other eye. An earring hung from one ear, the shape of a metallic blue feather, and snaking up his left bicep was a magnificent tattoo of an eagle in mid-flight. What looked to be a long, curved tooth, hung from a string around his neck.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” Jensen deadpanned.

Rosen actually cracked a smile. “I am from here,” he nodded. “But I am not from here.”

“I’m way too tired for riddles, Rosen.”

The smile widened. “I am from here,” he explained. “Just not from this time.”

Jensen paused for a few beats, waiting for the punch line and paling when it never came. “So, what?” he shrugged, his voice hoarse. “I’m on some sort of acid trip where I think I can travel through time or something? Fantastic. Jared’s mate is a mentally unstable lunatic.”

Rosen frowned. “Do not be foolish, young one,” he flicked his hand dismissively. “You are not nearly powerful for time travel yet.”

“Right. No, of course. I’m losing it.”

“Have you learnt nothing from your father, young one?” Rosen’s frustrated words gave Jensen pause from his panic attack.

“My father died when I was a baby,” he told Rosen softly. Pain crumpled the other man’s face, grief far more than one would expect from a stranger.

“I apologize, young one,” he stressed ardently. “If I were to know the fate which awaited you, I might have made better provisions.”

“No one was ‘to know’,” Jensen shook his head. “It was an accident. What do you mean, make provisions?”

“Come, young one,” Rosen beckoned him. “You were denied the chance to learn of this from your sire, but I shall try to be an adequate substitute.”

“Learn of what?”

Rosen smiled brilliantly. “Our ancestors.”

~*Jared*~
“Still not awake, huh?”

Jared lifted his head to meet his brother’s eyes. Jeff stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets, glancing worriedly at the prone form on the bed. The Alpha sat up from where he was lying next to Jensen, propping himself against the headboard but keeping his arms around his mate’s still body.

“It’s been four days, Jeff.” Jared’s voice cracked from lack of use. He hadn’t felt much like talking to anyone, preferring to sit silently next to his lover, waiting intently for some sort of any sort of reaction. He brushed aside a lock of Jensen’s hair, sighing cavernously. He ached for the sound of his mate’s voice, yearned for it in a way he could never describe. He knew his friends were becoming equally as worried for him as they were for Jensen, but he was grateful that none of them expected him to be okay. He wasn’t sure he would be, until Jensen was awake and smiling at him with green eyes sparkling and molten with love.

“And he’s been through a lot,” Jeff countered gently. “Give him time to recuperate from that.” Jared opened his mouth to argue but Jeff cut him off at the knees; “I don’t mean physically, Jare,” he clarified. “I mean emotionally. He really went through the mill with this one. Crazy Aunt, torture, watching you nearly die, somehow bringing you back…it’s gotta take one hell of a toll, and even Jensen has a limit on his strength.”

“I know.” Jared turned his attention back to his mate, one hand absently finding its way over his heart to feel that reassuring thumpthump that told him his mate was still with him. “Jeff, what if Jensen sacrificed…something, in exchange for my life? What if he sacrificed his life, and the wolf blood is all that’s keeping his heart beating?” Jared’s voice cracked and his body shook, merely contemplating the possibility. “How else could I have been brought back? And we both know he would have done it. What if…”

“What if he’s just resting,” Jeff interrupted him once more, “because he went to Hell and back, twice?”

Jared kept quiet, studying the planes of his mate’s face. Sighing, Jeff took a few steps closer, sitting on the bottom end of the bed.

“Your hand is over his heart,” Jeff observed quietly. “Can you feel its beat on your palm?”

Jared nodded wordlessly.

“Can you feel it in sync with your own?”

Still silent, he nodded again.

“Feel his heart beat in tandem with yours, little brother,” Jeff told him gently. “If something is wrong…if ever, anything is wrong…trust yourself to know it.”

“I’ll feel it?” Jared felt like the child he once was, seeking reassurance from a big brother that was always there when the time came needed.

Jeff never disappointed. “You’ll feel it,” he affirmed confidently, coming around to ruffle Jared’s hair with far more gentle affection than usual. “It’s the beauty of finding our mates.”

Suddenly feeling a need to be closer, Jared burrowed closer to his mate, grateful that Jeff knew well enough not to take it as a snub. Chris came into the room, and the same way he did every time, he glanced hopefully at the bed and then tried to mask the disappointed drop in his face when he saw
there was no change. Sighing quietly to himself, the long-haired alpha walked over, pulling at the covers and fussing unnecessarily.

“No change?” Jared glanced up at the question, the same one Chris had been asking him since he managed to leave Jensen for longer than ten minutes at a time.

“No change,” came the quiet confirmation. While Chris busied himself with drawing the curtains shut and switching on the overhead light, Jared pretended not to notice the light sheen of tears in his eyes.

“I’m going to check on the club for an hour or so,” Kane told him gruffly. “Freckles would have my ass if I allowed the place to be supervised by Garth for this long without checking on things.”

Jared felt the barest flickering of a smile coming on, one that almost managed to curve his lips upwards, but somehow only made it as far as a weak quirk. “No kidding. Later, man.”

Jeff left with Chris, but a moment later, Kane poked his head through the door again.

“Jared?”

The Alpha cut his gaze towards the doorway in silent acknowledgement.

“Try talking to him,” Chris suggested quietly. “I heard him tell Soph once, that the sound of your voice was all he needed to feel like he was coming home, or to feel safe, or to feel like everything was going to be okay. Maybe that’ll be all he needs to wake up.”

Chris left without a backwards glance, and maybe that was for the best because Jared didn’t know what he would’ve said had the other wolf expected any kind of response.

Jared was by far the more talkative of the two of them, and in retrospect, Jensen had always seemed content to listen to him ramble on for hours. When he was most harried, his mate often said that hearing Jared talk to him always served to calm his frayed nerves. The Alpha wasn’t naïve enough to think that he would have a fairytale moment and Jensen would magically awaken, but in his heart, he hoped that at the very least, Jensen might be able to hear him.

Might be able to take some modicum of comfort from the sound of his voice.

“Jen.”

He cleared his throat, his voice still croaky. What was he going to say?

The hand not firmly against Jensen’s heart, found its way absentely to soft, dirty blonde hair. At once, he let go of the tenuous hold he had on his feelings, allowed all of the overwhelming emotions since finding his mate to overflow. His eyes stung with tears and his throat ached with the force of his choked back sobs, but in that moment, he knew what to say.

“Jensen... baby, I love you so much. More than the moon and the stars, in ways I can never be sure will ever have an adequate description. You hold me together when I fall apart, and you always watch my blind side. You believe in me. You make me smile when I hurt so bad I just want to crumble. You make me brave, and strong, and fierce, and confident. You love me better than I ever knew I could be loved, and I don’t know that any amount of time with you will ever be enough for me.”

Sniffing lightly, he pressed a tender kiss to Jensen’s temple. “If you can hear me right now, Jen, then just know that I love you more than I know how to describe. You can rest as long as you need,
because I’m not going to leave you for a second.” He chuckled thickly, an empty laugh. “Except maybe to shower, because I don’t want my reeking pits to be the first thing you notice when you wake up.” He kissed gently on the corner of his mate’s pouty lips. “Take your time, my love, mo chroï…just make sure that you do wake up. No matter what. Just wake up.”

~*Jensen*~

“No matter what. Just wake up.”

Jensen didn’t bother fighting back his tears. “I have to go back to him,” he told Rosen thickly. “He needs me.”

“You need to learn of what happened, of what is to be.”

Jensen cut his gaze to Rosen, who had apparently taken on something on a mentoring role. A second ago, he’d been intrigued at the man’s proclamation of learning of his ancestry, but now? Now he just wanted to be back in Jared’s arms, able to wipe away the Alpha’s tears and tell him how much he loved him. For the first time, he wondered whether he would even be allowed to.

“Am I allowed…can I go back to him?”

Rosen’s eyes fell on to him, softening at the vulnerability in his tone. “You love him a great deal, young one.”

Deciding to take the bull by the proverbial horn, Jensen straightened his back, facing Rosen with steel in his eyes. “I do. I’m not going to let anyone keep me from going back to him.” Suddenly, an awful idea occurred to him. “Is that the price for saving him? My life for Jared’s?”

He knew things like that were always too good to be true.

“You would not have paid such a price?” Rosen asked frankly.

“I would make that very same decision every time, in a heartbeat,” Jensen countered. “But not you, and not even the thing that saved Jared, can keep me away from him.” He hoped Rosen heard the words he left unspoken; ‘I’d fight the world to get back to him.’

Rosen smiled brilliantly, undefinable pride radiating off him in waves. “You are a fierce one!” he chuckled delightedly. “You are a strong warrior, young one, more so than I had imagined. Stronger than your father, even.”

“How did you know my father?”

“One question at a time.” Rosen grinned indulgently. “There are no prices for the lives you can save, young one. You will see your reason for existence soon enough…but there are more pressing matters at the moment.” Rosen sat on the floor, legs crossed Indian-style, gesturing for Jensen to join him. “As for your father,” he continued, once Jensen had reluctantly sat on the surprisingly comfortable floor, “I know him in the same way I know you, young one. I too, was his spirit guide, although he had an idea of what he was before he met me.”

“What he was? Being….?”
“A descendant of the longest and most powerful line of Shamans to date.” Jensen nodded slowly, taking this in, processing it.

“Fantastic. Awesome. Terrific. You’re just as crazy as I am. Maybe they’ll give us a discount if we’re both admitted at the same time. I wonder if they’ll start us on meds, or if they’ll just go straight to…ow!!” Jensen yelped as Rosen clobbered him over the back of his head, interrupting him mid-sentence. His hand flew to rub at the stinging spot and he glared at the man in front of him, who was staring serenely back without any hint of remorse on his face. “What the hell was that for, Rosen?” he griped.

“Respect your elders, young one.”

“Elder?” Jensen scoffed. “You can’t be much older than my brother, Josh. Speaking of which, why do you keep calling me that?”

“I am many moons older than your brother, young one.”

“Yeah, you’re also buckets crazier than I thought, old man.”

Jensen ducked as Rosen’s hand came back to Gibbs smack him, grinning triumphantly as he missed it.

Rosen smiled in grudging respect. “If I were to refer to you directly, it would bring suffering to you,” he explained. “It is a wise rule to remember; Shamans do not ever speak of beings by their regular names, for it will bring invariable disaster to the ones mentioned.”

“I’ll remember that the next time I call the spirits to my padded white room for a midnight chat.”

Rosen bristled at his dry tone. “You had no qualms accepting your love’s true form as an Alpha Were,” he pointed out testily. “Why do you not believe in what you are?”

“He shifted in front of me!” Jensen defended. “I saw it with my own two eyes!”

“And you did not see your mate at the threshold of Death become revived at your own hand?”

Fair enough.


“No Ackles man has ever been ordinary, young one,” he declared softly. “I cannot help you if you will not accept your own greatness.”

Was that what his hesitancy was? Was he jaded by his past enough to believe he was never capable of greatness? Was that why he was so resistant to believe something that had admittedly happened right in front of him?

Or was it the fear that he would let his entire family line down, if he were to accept a mantle of greatness without being sure that he was what they needed him to be?

As if reading his thoughts- which wasn’t completely unlikely at this point- Rosen gentled his voice. “You can never disappoint me, young one.”

After a moment of quiet deliberation, Jensen forced a nod. “Okay. Where do we start?”
So beautiful.

The thought played on a loop in Jared’s mind as he traced his mate’s features with his eyes. It had been just over a day since he’d spoken to Jensen, without any luck, but Jared could swear a crease in his forehead straightened out. He had to believe that Jensen could hear him, or he was going to go crazy, and he hadn’t even passed the one-week mark yet.

Nearing the end of the fifth day, Jared wasn’t entirely surprised when Chris came into the room looking grim.

“You’re father is on his way here.”

Kane sure didn’t mince his words.

Jared sat up, his hand over Jensen’s heart an unconscious gesture by now. “How long?” he asked shortly.

“Seven minutes, tops.”

Jared swung his legs over the edge of the bed, reluctantly removing his hand from his mate’s chest. Standing up, he yanked a t-shirt over his bare chest as he moved around the bed. He dismissed the idea of switching out his sweats for a pair of jeans, and stalked to the dresser to shove handfuls of the clothes they’d packed for Jensen, back into his black duffel.

“He wants you to come home and take up your responsibility as future Pack Alpha,” Chris explained as he crossed the room to draw the curtains, plunging them into semi-darkness. He stayed there, peering through a crack in the curtain, acting as a look-out as Jared tenderly pushed one of his hoodies over Jensen’s head. He didn’t want his mate to get cold.

“We knew he’d do this sooner or later,” Jeff suddenly entered the room. Chris and Jared’s gazes snapped to the elder Were and he smiled thinly at them. “The pack is still on your side, Jare,” he aimed his statement at the Alpha heir. “Even Ellen stuck up for you, but Dad wouldn’t budge.”

Jared just nodded again, but inwardly, he was glad of the support the pack had given him. Deep inside him, he knew this was the first sign of the transition; the pack’s loyalty was shifting gradually to him. He was making the change from future Pack Alpha, to Pack Alpha, and the tides were changing direction. He always thought he’d be excited when the day came that the pack unconsciously began to look to him as their Alpha…now, he just knew with unequivocal clarity that he didn’t want to- couldn’t- undergo the change without Jensen at his side. He needed his mate.

“Where are you gonna go?” Jeff asked. Jared shook his head even before the question was fully formed.

“You both need plausible deniability,” he said, his voice gone gruff once more. “I’ll call tomorrow, tell you where we’re at.”

With that, he lifted Jensen into his arms with utmost care. Chris wordlessly hoisted the duffel on to his shoulder and Jeff grabbed the keys to the truck, moving ahead to open the doors for him. Concern thrummed through him momentarily, and he stalled, glancing at Jeff and Chris.

“Don’t think about it, little brother.” Jeff’s shrewd eyes pinned him in place. “You’re not abandoning
us to deal with Dad. We’re dealing with him because we want you and Jensen to be out of his reach until Jensen’s back to firing on all cylinders.”

“I don’t want him around added tension,” Chris added, jerking his head at Jensen. “I’d take dealing with your dad over impairing his recovery.”

“Ditto.” Jeff smiled at the shock and confusion in Jared’s eyes. “I may not have known him very long,” Jeff allowed, “but he stood up for you to dad, he doesn’t look at any of us differently for being Were, and he saved your life. Suffice to say, Jensen Ackles more than has a place in my family.”

Jared nodded; he really wasn’t even surprised anymore, at the way his mate could win people over without trying. He drove as carefully as he could with his precious cargo, only relaxing once they reached the open stretch of road that led to the little house his grandfather had left him. Thankfully, he’d had the foresight to begin cleaning the place out the day after he first took Jensen there. Initially, he had planned on making his mom teach him how to cook something simple, and then whisking Jen to the house on his birthday to cook for him. He couldn’t deny that he was disappointed; the first time they were in the house should not have been because Jensen was hurt and comatose, and they were evading his father; but he would be lying if he said that he wouldn’t appreciate the time alone. Spooning his mate close to him and blocking out the rest of the world was a welcome idea.

Once they got there, Jared first bundled Jensen into his arms and carried him inside, ever so gently laying him on the recently dressed king-sized bed in the master bedroom. He was glad that he’d aired the place out a few days ago, because opening a window now would be inviting a cold to find Jensen. He took his time tucking his mate in before bringing in their duffels and locking the doors. In his haste to get back to his lover, Jared didn’t bother to unpack, leaving the bags at the door and lifting his t-shirt above his head in a smooth motion and cuddling up to his mate. He pressed his hand against Jensen’s heart and matched their breathing, soothing his tense muscles. He pulled Jensen closer, keeping up their synchronized breathing, and gently caressing the exposed skin at Jensen’s hip. It was only a few minutes before he fell asleep.

~*Jensen*~

He felt like his head was about to explode, with everything Rosen had dropped on him.

“So,” he started to clarify, “you’re telling me that every time I’ve heard my loved ones’, that it wasn’t actually flashbacks, but their spirits talking to me?”

“Yes.” Came the patient reply.

“And the voice that told me to fight for Jared, that was my dad?”

“So it would seem.”

“And they’re always around me, I just need to learn how to hone my abilities?”

“Indeed.”

“And with their help, I can heal other people like I did for Jared?”

“Precisely.”
“But I can’t heal myself?”

“No, you cannot.”

Jensen huffed a breath. “That makes next to no sense.”

Rosen simply smiled serenely at him, content to wait until Jensen ordered his thoughts once more.

“And I have a spirit animal?” Jensen double-checked, and Rosen nodded with a pleased smile. “An animal that is a manifestation of my soul, and one that will guide and protect me at any given time? And I would be able to shift into this animal if I were to heal someone?”

“Yes, yes, and no.” The man leaned forward to elaborate. “You have a spirit animal, yes, and he will protect you, yes, but the blood line has been saturated for centuries. Had your bloodline been slightly stronger, then you may have been able to shift forms physically, but that is not the case.”

Jensen nodded thoughtfully. “What’s my spirit animal?”

Rosen’s smile turned sly. “I thought you would know that without asking.”

Turned out, once he thought about it, he did. “It’s a wolf, isn’t it?” he grinned, warmth flooding his chest. Rosen nodded and he blushed lightly. Without warning, a projection of a hazel brown wolf appeared in front of him, nudging him gently. Thought it seemed more astral than real, he could feel every touch, could feel the protectiveness the wolf radiated. Not that he was surprised; he would recognize his spirit wolf anywhere in the world.

Jared really was a part of his soul.

Speaking of…

“I need to get back to him,” Jensen reminded his spirit guide. The man nodded.

“I know, young one. There is little else I can teach you; the reach of your power will be in your hands now.” Rosen grasped his shoulders. “Good luck, young one.”

“One more thing,” Jensen held his hand over one of his mentor’s, stalling him. He felt the tug of the real world in the pit of his belly, and he knew he had precious few seconds. “Who are you?”

Rosen smiled affectionately. “I am among the first of the Ackles’ descendants, young one,” he said, his voice getting softer the farther away Jensen was being pulled. “I am your grandfather of hundreds of grandfathers between us.”

Jensen started, wondering why he hadn’t seen the uncanny resemblance before. His great-great-great-who know how many more great’s- grandfather…

…and then he was falling.

Really, he thought it would be more of a spectacle to wake up after falling so long into nothing but white. In actuality, his eyes just popped open, met with the darkness of an unfamiliar bedroom. He let out a shaky breath, casting his eyes around the room as he tried to adjust to the darkness. He realized quickly that Jared was plastered to his back, one hand above his heart and the other at his hip, and it was the familiar feeling that made his muscles uncoil. He relished in every puff of breath that hit his neck, that proved to him that his lover was alive, and well, and next to him.

And waiting for him.
Normally, Jensen might have given Jared the time to sleep, but he needed to feel the Alpha all around him at that moment. Turning in the strong arms that enveloped him, he reached up to brush hair away from Jared’s face. He pressed his lips once, twice, three times against Jared’s, watching as each kiss brought his mate closer to reality.

Closer to him.

“Jared?”

~*Jared*~

He heard the soft whisper of his name, and he pressed his eyes closed even tighter. He didn’t want to wake up; he was in some dream world where Jensen was awake and smiling and kissing him, and damn it, Jared didn’t want to wake up and face the reality that was his mate’s too-still form.

“Jay, wake up…”

He frowned mutinously; why did Jensen want him to wake up? They were together in whatever reality this was. He would gladly sleep forever if it meant he could stay with Jensen. Soft lips pressed against his once more, feeling more tangible. Did this mean he was falling back to sleep? A contented hum escaped him at the small victory.

But then…

“Ouch!” Jared’s eyes flew open of their own volition, as he was startled into consciousness by a punch to the shoulder. His hand came up automatically to rub at the spot, and he pouted at his mate, who was glaring at him with narrowed green eyes.

Narrowed, green, very much open eyes.

His lips parted on a gasp. “Baby?”

Jensen ignored his gasp. “What in all hell were you thinking, Jared Tristan Padalecki?!’” he all but growled. “You could have died! You DID die! You…you were…and I…”

But Jared wasn’t paying attention to a single word leaving those sinful lips, because all he could fathom at that moment was that his mate was finally awake.

“You’re awake,” he whispered, as if he didn’t dare to believe it. Jensen stopped mid-rant as Jared hesitantly touched his face. “You’re awake, you’re here…you’re…okay…”

“I’m okay,” Jensen nodded. The words were spoken softly. “We’re both okay.”

And really, that was as far as Jared could manage before the dam fucking shattered.

He was on top of his mate in a second, desperate hands trying to touch everywhere at once while equally urgent lips sought their home. Their kiss was brutal and hurried, and if not the punch, then the way Jensen was clutching him and mewling would definitely have convinced him that he was awake.

Jared bit unforgivingly at his mate’s lips, never crossing the line into actual pain, even in his crazed and lustful state mindful of hurting his lover. His hands ripped their clothes off, and he’d be lying if
he said the tearing cloth and flying buttons had even remotely drifted into his awareness. Quite frankly, all he could register was the feel of his mate underneath him, responsive, loving, beautiful, and awake. So very, incredibly, blessedly awake.

Jared’s mouth drifted from his mate’s bruised ones, and he trailed a path down Jensen’s throat, biting and suckling and devouring the skin until his mark was etched firmly into Jen’s pale skin. For his part, Jensen simply writhed underneath him, body arching towards Jared’s as though they were magnetized. A constant stream of needy moans slipped from his mouth, unintelligible even as Jared understood them perfectly. He heard every “Oh God” and “Please Jay” and “I love you so much” and “don’t leave me” in Jensen’s whimpers, heard them because he was saying the same thing every time he groaned or gasped.

He ground down slowly, reveling in the low keen it tore from Jensen’s mouth. His desperation abated ever so slightly as he took in the sight of Jensen; back curved off the bed, long column of his marked-up throat bared in submission, and head thrown back in pleasure. His eyes were closed, long lashes brushing against freckled cheeks, and the absence of those mesmerizing green eyes made the anxiety return, his belly flip-flopping.

He nudged the stretch of exposed throat with his nose. “Open your eyes,” he demanded roughly, a counterpoint to his gentle nuzzling. “I need to see your eyes.”

Stunning green orbs snapped open and almost instantly, Jared’s tension eased. Locking their heated gazes, Jared ran his hand, deliberately slow and firm, down Jensen’s body, stopping just short of his tented boxers.

His mate wasn’t any more patient than he was, it seemed, because for the first time, Jensen didn’t let Jared have the upper hand. Instead, he thrust his hips upwards, dragging his boxer shorts covered cock slowly over Jared’s. A growl escaped the Alpha’s mouth, and he pinned Jensen down with his own hips, rutting against him teasingly for a few beats and downright relishing the whimpers his mate let out.

“Damn it, Jen,” he gasped out. “I missed you so fucking much, baby boy, I missed you, I missed you…”

“I missed you too, Jay,” Jensen breathed, eyes wide and equal parts loving and lustful. “So much. I need you inside me, need to feel you all over me…” Jensen shook his head mindlessly, pleading. “Please Jay, I need…need you…”

“Shh, baby boy, I got you,” he crooned automatically, hands already tearing past the final barrier between them. They both groaned as they finally connected, skin to skin. The feel of Jensen’s hard, hot member against his own threatened to pop his knot right then, and Jared knew that soft and gentle was out of the question tonight.

Tonight was about claiming what he had come so fucking close to losing forever.

Without warning, he gripped Jensen’s cock and jerked him roughly, making him cry out and grab on to Jared like he was a lifebuoy. “That’s it, baby boy,” he mumbled encouragingly before pressing a hard kiss to Jen’s lips, never faltering as he stripped Jensen’s cock. “So perfect, so amazing…let go, Jen, let go baby.”

Maybe it was because they were so hungry for each other, or maybe it was because their connection had almost never been this clear, but only a few moments later, Jensen exploded over his hand.

It was damn near the hottest fucking thing he’d ever seen.
“You’d better not be done with me, Padalecki,” Jensen gasped, green eyes glinting mischievously as he rolled his hips teasingly. Jared growled, biting down on Jensen’s shoulder before grinning wolfishly down at him.

“Baby, I’m just barely getting started.”

~*Jensen*~

He might have actually whimpered at the statement.

His every nerve ending was on overload, raw and sensitive, his body reacting to the lightest of his lover’s touches, singing at the slightest hint of attention. If he wasn’t so desperate to feel connected to the love of his life, he might have been embarrassed at the way he’d been pushing and pressing against Jared.

It was definitely worth it though, for the cracks that were showing in Jared’s control.

Leaning forward, Jared latched his mouth on to Jensen’s nipple, suckling it roughly. His hand was still languidly stroking Jensen’s dick, and a moment too late, he realized that Jared was slicking his hand up with his come as a substitute for lube.

He moaned like a fucking porn star as Jared pressed two fingers into his waiting hole, hips jerking involuntarily at the incredibly erotic feelings Jared was eliciting in him. It was far dirtier, and far more of a turn-on than he cared admitting, Jared using his own come as lube, but if his breathless gasping wasn’t indicator enough, his spent cock twitching once more would definitely have been.

“Fuck, Jared, yes,” he keened mindlessly as his Alpha added a third finger, brushing up against his prostate in just the most sublime way. “Fuck me, Jay…”

“Soon, baby boy,” he promised, finger-fucking him relentlessly. He went back to torturing Jensen’s nipples, adding a fourth finger now. The burn was more pronounced this time, but Jensen craved the sting, because at that moment, it meant that he was with his mate, his Jared, and they were both alive and well.

Despite this, it seemed that Jared could no more hurt him than he could grow an extra limb. He slowed his strokes, allowing Jensen a minute to adjust and murmuring soothing words under his breath. Jensen couldn’t complain; the sound of Jared’s voice and the feel of his weight on top of him, made him content in a way he hadn’t been in a while.

“Need you, baby boy,” Jared groaned, dropping his head to rest briefly in the crook of Jensen’s neck. Harsh breaths hit his sweaty skin, making Jensen shiver delightfully. “Gotta be inside you.”

“Do it, Jay,” he practically begged, pushing himself down on Jared’s fingers in encouragement. “Please, I fucking need you.”

Predictably, his begging hit a button inside his admittedly dominant mate, and Jared shoved into him with a fluid thrust. Jensen screamed in pleasure and pain, and Jared shushed him apologetically. Tugging lightly on the Alpha’s hair, Jensen managed a wan smile.

“I’m okay,” he reassured. “More than. I need to feel you, it makes this real, as opposed to wishing so hard it would be.” He felt ridiculous as tears built behind his eyes, feeling even worse when one fell
and Jared’s face adopted a stricken expression.

“Baby, I’m sorry,” Jared started, licking the tear drop off his cheek. Jensen shook his head vehemently as more tears forced their way past his eyelashes.

“Not hurt,” he choked out. “Just… I almost lost you, Jared.” It finally hit home, and Jensen felt like his chest was about to explode with relief. “I almost lost you forever.”

“Hey, hey, hey…” Jared leaned down, nuzzling his cheek and pressing small kisses wherever he could. “I’m here, love…I’m not going to leave you, just like you can’t leave me like that ever again.” Hazel eyes glinted with the tears that Jared was now shedding too. “We’re here together, and I’m going to fight tooth and nail to stay here.”

“Me too,” he nodded thickly. He thought back to his willingness to take on the whole Shaman world if they tried to keep him away from Jared. “I’d fight Heaven, Hell and everyone in between so I can get to you.”

Instead of answering, Jared rolled his hips gently, making Jensen moan at the full sensation. His lover created a slow rhythm, driving Jensen out of his mind with each slow drag of Jared’s hot shaft against his tender rim. The pain dulled completely, and all that was left was mind-numbing pleasure.

Jared’s languid pace was making him crazy, and it was torture when the Alpha reached his hand between them and began stroking Jensen’s half-hard cock, coaxing him to full hardness until he was ready to scream at the overload of sensations. He forced himself by sheer will to keep his eyes opened, and Jared never left his gaze for too long. It was a level of connection and intimacy that only compounded to their raging desire.

He bucked wildly when Jared thumbed the head of his cock, teasing the slit mercilessly. “Fuck, Jared…” he cried out helplessly, his throat bared once more in unequivocal submission. Breathy gasps were wrenched from his mouth with each thrust as Jared nailed his prostate over and over. When Jared’s knot began to stretch him even further, he quickly decided that Jared was going to kill him with his teasing pace, and he resolved to resort to desperate measures.

The only thing that would get Jared to move faster.

He locked his hungry eyes with Jared’s. “Please fuck me,” he outright pleaded, tightening his grip on Jared’s shoulders. “Please, Alpha. Fuck me. Claim me.”

The title shattered the last of Jared’s control. His lover began pounding into him, punched out gasps from Jensen and grunts from Jared filling the otherwise still air.


“Fuck, yes, Alpha,” he agreed easily, trying to meet Jared’s pistoning hips with his own upwards thrusts and keening when Jared’s huge knot finally pushed into his tender hole. “Right there,” he whimpered, seeing stars as Jared’s knot pressed firmly against his prostate. He threw his head back in abandon, pleasure searing through his veins in ways he barely knew how to handle.

“That’s it, baby boy,” Jared rumbled approvingly as Jensen lifted his hips in time with Jared’s thrusts, ensuring that they were never disconnected. “Just like that.”

They only lasted a few more thrusts before Jensen came with a scream, covering their already sweat-slicked bodies with ropes of come. His ass clenching around Jared was enough to make the Alpha explode too, and he did so while biting possessively into Jensen’s neck, marking him in just the same
way that his come painting Jensen’s insides did.

Jared collapsed on to him, breathing heavily, and Jensen relished in the warmth and weight of his mate. Mustering the last of his energy, he brought his hand up to tangle in Jared’s locks, unconsciously soothing. After a minute, Jared yanked out one of their sheets, cleaning Jensen off with it before throwing it to the floor next to the bed. He flipped them around and Jensen moaned at the tug on his rim from Jared’s knot. Shushing him tenderly, Jared spooned him from behind, his back snug against Jared’s chest, and Jensen instantly relaxed in the protective embrace.

“Don’t you dare make me come so close to losing you again,” he mumbled, his words slurring in his tiredness.

“Never, love,” Jared promised. “As long as you stop getting yourself into these dangerous situations.”

Jensen hummed as Jared pressed his lips against the nape of his neck. “Sounds like a plan.”

~*Jared*~

“A shaman descendant?” Jared repeated, testing out the feel of the words on his tongue. They hadn’t slept for very long, which frankly, he was glad for, and they were spooned close together as Jensen explained his time with Rosen in whatever white world he was in.

“I know, it sounds crazy,” Jensen winced almost imperceptibly and Jared ran a soothing hand down his mate’s flank.

“Not really,” he comforted, nuzzling at the pale skin of his neck. “It would explain how you healed me.” He pressed a playful kiss to the spot beneath Jensen’s ear. “I always knew there was something special about you,” he teased. “I just thought it might have been your ass.”

“Shut up, Jay,” Jensen griped with no real heat. Jared rocked into aforementioned ass, where they were still knotted, and he grinned when his mate blushed fiercely. “Although,” Jensen added after a beat, “I do have a fucking awesome ass.”

Jared laughed, for the first time in a week or so. “That you do, baby boy.”

They lazed for a moment in comfortable silence, before Jensen craned his head to look at him.

“Rosen said I had to practice my power in order to use it,” he said in a small voice.

Jared nudged at his mate’s temple with his nose. “Do you want to?” he asked, in what he hoped was an even tone.

Biting his lip, Jensen nodded slowly. “Yes, I do.” His mate looked worried about his reaction, and Jared was quick to reassure him with a bright smile. He pressed a kiss to Jen’s lips and licked playfully at the bottom of his jaw.

“Good,” he nodded happily. “It takes a lot of courage to explore something this big, but it’s a huge part of you. I’m so proud of you for not shying away from it.”

Jensen flushed, but a pleased look entered his eyes. “There’s something else,” he added, a soft smile
coming on to his face as he peered up at Jared from underneath his lashes. “I have a spirit animal that supposedly protects me. It’s an animal manifestation of my soul.” His mate bit his lip shyly. “My spirit animal is your wolf.”

“My…my wolf?” Jared repeated disbelievingly, incredible warmth flooding his chest like a nuclear reaction. “Your spirit animal is my wolf?”

Jensen nodded. “Yes. You’re the purest and best part of me, Jay,” he repeated the words he had said to the other wolf. “How could it have been anything else?”

Jared kissed him hungrily, unable to find the words that would describe what Jensen meant to him. It seemed his mate understood, as always, and returned his kiss with equal fervor.

“Your turn,” Jensen spoke breathlessly once they broke apart. “What happened while I was unconscious? How long was I out?”

Jared’s chest pinched painfully. “Longest five days of my life,” he whispered roughly. Green eyes softened in compassion and Jared relented as his mate took his hand, twining their fingers and bringing them to rest over his heart. The faster beating against his palm reassured him in the same way it did before, and Jared let out a ragged breath. “You were so still, baby,” he whispered, allowing his anguish to leak into his voice. “I didn’t leave you, save for five minute showers, and it took a couple days before Chris could let you out of his sight for more than a few minutes.”

“He’s not mad at me? For my aunt, and what she did?” Jensen asked worriedly.

Jared shook his head. “Not even a little bit,” he assured him, feeling Jensen’s muscles uncoil underneath him. “All he could think about was not letting them take the last person in his family away from him.”

“Jay…” Jensen’s voice was hesitant. “I found out more. Katherine let something slip about Chris and his family.” His mate sought his eyes. “Did you know Chris’ mom was a human?”

Jared’s eyes widened, realization slamming into him. “That’s why they attacked them?” he asked, even though he was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

“I guess you didn’t know,” Jensen commented with an affirmative nod. “Jay…” he bit his lip tentatively. “Your dad knew.”

Jared’s heart stuttered as several things fell into place for him. “He exiled them from packlands,” he breathed in horror at the revelation. “That’s why Chris lives off the official grounds.”

His mate nodded, sympathy rolling off him in waves. “That’s what it seems like,” he mumbled.

“And that’s why he disapproves of us too?”

Jensen winced. “I think so. He doesn’t want the same fate to reach you.”

More important that the epiphany of what a cold-hearted bastard his father had been, was the overwhelming certainty that his mate was afraid of that happening too. “I’m never going to let anyone do that to us,” he vowed fiercely, trying to stop his mate from thinking that they were safer apart. “Not to us, and not to anyone else. I promise, Jen.”

“I know,” came the soft nod. Jensen brought their intertwined hands to his lips for a brief kiss. “Don’t worry. I’ll admit that I thought about you being better off without me, but I promised you before; I’m not ever going to leave you, not unless you ask me to.”
Jared relaxed, sensing that his mate would never break that promise to him. “When are you going to tell Chris?”

“Soon,” Jensen answered firmly. “I don’t want to hurt him, but keeping this from him would just do more harm than good.” He sighed, snuggling closer to Jared. “Is it over, Jay?” he asked, vulnerability creeping into his voice.

Jared thought about Katherine, bound in silver shackles in Jim Beaver’s basement, awaiting her fate to be decided by the nephew she had tried to kill out of insane grief. He thought about his father, who had unwittingly lent a proverbial hand in the Kane massacre, and who was determined to separate him from his mate. He thought about the Morgan Pack, and the dispute between Chris and Sophia’s mating. He thought about Jensen’s ex, and the bruises that had stopped appearing on his mate, without any indication of who had put them there in the first place.

But then he thought about the love of his life, lying in his arms, snuggled warm and close and on the brink of sleep. He thought about their connection, which had never been stronger, and about the undying certainty that they’d fight against all the worlds to be with one another.

And his answer was simple.

“It’s over for now, love,” he breathed, burying his face in Jensen’s neck. “I’ve got you, and I’ll keep you safe. Sleep, baby…I’ve got you.”

They could handle the world tomorrow. Because right then and there, they were together, and for now, that was all that mattered.

“I love you more than the moon and the stars, baby.”

“I love you too, Jay. Forever and always.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Any suggestions as to handling Aunt Kath?

Leave me some love and let me know what you thought of this chapter, please! Much love! <3
Chapter Notes

One month.

You're all entitled to hate me forever.

I'm so incredibly sorry for the long-ass wait! RL has been kicking me in the ass lately, and I've just been so demotivated, even when it came to my writing. However, I promised not to abandon all you fantastic, amazing people, and I won't. So I'm late, but I come bearing an update!

Shout out to Pam Houston and NongPradu for guessing where I was going with this chapter!

This chapter is dedicated to frostedgoddess, lovesickmelody, jungle_moon, chyna.29, halfwit, lab_girl and lovefinder. You guys stick with me constantly, through all my delays and chapters, and I love y'all for it!

Also dedicated to every last one of you amazing readers, who never fail to humble, awe and inspire me. After 30+ chapters, its still an honor to know my fic has your attention. Much love!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

The corridor was murky black, a seemingly endless stretch of expansive darkness in front of him. He ran blindly, but his limbs felt like they were encased in lead, and though he could hardly see his paw on the ground in front of him, somehow he knew that he was making little to no progress down the impossibly long hallway.

“JARED!”

His heart beat double time at the scream of his beloved mate. He tried to shout an assurance, tried to tell Jensen that he was coming for him, but his throat was tied in knots. All that emerged from his lips was an almost soundless croak.

“JARED!”

Tears of desperation filled his eyes and his breaths became pants as he pushed himself closer to the agonized voice. Every terrified yelp and every tortured scream ripped a new scar into his heart, and Jared thought he might collapse from the pain.

But it was nothing compared to the pain that came, when the screaming abruptly stopped.

A sense of dread filled him, and somehow, he broke from his leaden-legged prison. He slammed into the now-familiar door, and it sprang open to reveal his worst nightmare.
The stench of fear and pain and death assaulted his sensitive nose. Jensen was strung up from the ceiling in front of him, hanging limply, blood flowing in small rivulets down his once-perfect body. Not an inch of the pale skin he loved so much was left unbruised, and cold, unstaring green eyes met his, the deadness in them a mockery of the liveliness that was usually present in his mate’s expressive emerald orbs.

His limbs gave out underneath him as a howl was ripped from his teeth. The sound was filled with a curse and a plea; a desperate plea to be answered by his mate, and the curse that came knowing that an answer was not forthcoming.

Before he could blink, Katherine was next to Jensen, running a mocking finger down his cheek. Mindless rage incited in his veins, but when he tried to lunge at her, he found himself stuck fast to the ground. She cackled, and patted his mate’s face none too gently.

“He is mine now,” she crowed, seeming to delight in his torment and fury. “He gave his life to save your own…he belongs right here with me now.” She smirked. “Is it not ironic that you killed me, only for your precious little whore to be sent to the very same fate? To the very same Hell?”

“No!” Jared snarled helplessly. “You’re lying!”

“It’s over, son.”

Jared started as his father suddenly materialized next to him. Malignance shone from his eyes, and for the first time, Jared didn’t recognize the man he called his father.

“It’s over,” Gerald Padalecki repeated. “He’s finally dead. I’ve finally managed to put the incompetent and nosey little brat exactly where he belongs; in a hole in the ground.”

“Dad…” Jared’s voice broke on a sob, shaking his head in disbelief. “Tell me you didn’t…”

“He did.” Jared’s head snapped up as Jensen’s voice echoed in the cloying darkness. His mate’s corpse stayed motionless, but it was no denying that the voice was his. “He killed me, Jared,” the cold and accusing voice rang out. “He killed me, and you just sat back and let him do it! You let him torture and kill your own mate because you weren’t strong enough to stand up to him!”

“No!” Jared sobbed, choking. “No, baby, please…”

“It’s all your fault!”

“No, please, no!”

"Murderers!"

"No…Jensen! JEN…”

“…SEN!!!”

Jared jerked violently in bed as his mate’s name left his lips in a shout. Instantly, warm arms were around him, pulling him into a solid torso. Hands began caressing his hair, and a whiskey-smooth voice was murmuring nonsensically into his ears.

“It’s okay, Jay, it’s all over now. It’s okay. We’re okay. We’re both here, both safe. We’re good, babe, we’re fine…”

Jared clung to his beloved Jensen, soundless sobs racking his frame. A small voice in the back of his
mind told him that he had to be the strong one, told him that Jensen had gone through just as much hell in the past few days as he had…but at that moment, all that was keeping Jared sane, were the arms that were tightly wrapped around him.

Somehow sensing that the words weren’t making much of a difference, his mate changed his approach. Jensen began humming slowly under his breath, a low-pitched melody that sparked recognition in Jared’s mind.

*I’ll Be Your Crying Shoulder.*

Jared’s mind flashed back to the night he’d first heard this song. It was a normal night at the club, and he had been waiting for Jensen to get off so he could drive his mate home. A DJ was scheduled for the rest of the night and Jen’s newest hire meant that he could go home earlier than normal, so they’d decided to stay a while since the whole gang from school was there too. It was the first time Jared had gotten to enjoy the club with his boyfriend, while Jen wasn’t working, and he’d pulled him to dance when the DJ changed the song to Edwin McCain’s *Crying Shoulder.*

That moment, holding Jensen in his arms, everything had suspended in time. Nothing mattered because he had his entire world in his arms. Looking down into Jensen’s emerald eyes, he had known that the man felt the same, and that precious stitch of time had been just theirs, untainted by anything or anyone else.

Now, as he heard the familiar tune, he relaxed in his mate’s arms, allowing himself to remember that moment and bask in the reality that he still had the love of his life. Nightmares couldn’t take away from the fact that they were here and together, and this time, he was secure in the knowledge that his dream was not prophetic, rather just a product of their traumatic past few days.

His voice deep and smooth, Jensen began singing to him, and for all its beauty, Jared couldn’t find it in himself to feel anything but intense love.

“And rain falls, angry on the tin roof,
As we lie awake in our bed.
You’re my survival.
You’re my living proof.
My love is alive, not dead.

So tell me, that we belong together.
Dress it up, in the trappings of love,
I’ll be captivated. I’ll hang from your lips,
instead of the gallows of heartache, that hang from above.”

Jensen tensed almost imperceptibly, and Jared sensed the significance in what his mate was about to sing.

“You know I’ve dropped out, burned up, fought my way back from the dead.”

Jared’s breath caught in his throat, and Jensen tenderly brushed a lock of his hair back. The Alpha’s chest was on fire, and if he had ever thought that he couldn’t love his mate more, he had been sorely mistaken.

“I’ve tuned in, turned on, remembered the things that you said.”

Jensen brought his head forward, resting his forehead on Jared’s.

"And I’ll be your crying shoulder…"
I’ll be the greatest fan of your life.”

~*Jensen*~

The last bit of fear in Jared’s hazel eyes disappeared along with the last note of the song. A part of Jensen was worried that his Alpha mate would berate him for resorting to childish singing, but it was the only thing he could think of that would remind Jared of happier, serene times. The sex had cured their desperation and reinforced their raging love, but Jensen knew from experience that only tenderness would temper the fear.

All the same, he was relieved when all Jared did was hug him closer and nuzzle peacefully into the nape of his neck.

“I’m not half the man I am- not half the Alpha I am- without you. You know that?”

Tears made his eyes burn, and he nestled into the crook between his lover’s shoulder and neck. “What the hell did I do to deserve you, Jared Padalecki?” he asked, his voice a low murmur. He placed his hand in Jared’s, turning his face to kiss the sensitive skin of his neck. “I know that you think otherwise, but you should know…Jay, you save my life every single day. Every time you look at me, touch me, hug me, tell me you love me…you’re fixing the parts of me that I once thought would be broken forever.” He peeked up at his lover, who was looking at him with an unfathomable amount of love in his hazel eyes. “You gave me something that I never thought I would have again, not in this lifetime.”

Jared kissed him slowly, sensually, sitting up as he took back control of their embrace. “What’s that?” he asked, without lifting his lips from Jensen’s.

“Something to fight for. Someone to come back home to.”

Jared turned in a sudden motion, pinning him to the bed and ravishing his mouth like he was a dying man, and Jensen was his cure. The Alpha nipped demandingly at his bottom lip, licking into his mouth when Jensen moaned in submission. Hands travelled leisurely, this exploration less about reclaiming and more about affirmation of the second chance they were given by Jensen’s mysterious lineage and abilities.

“I’m sorry,” the Alpha apologized huskily once they broke apart. “The last thing you need is to deal with my nightmares on top of your own.”

Jensen responded by gently flicking Jared’s ear in reproach. “You’ve comforted me after more nightmares than I can count,” he chided. “Why can’t I be the one to comfort you for once?”

Jared scrunched up his face in contemplation. “I’m an Alpha,” he said plaintively, as though this was his justification for everything, which in a way, it was. “I’m not supposed to get scared of something that’s just in my head. I’m supposed to be some kind of fearless leader.”

“Bullshit,” Jen snorted indelicately. “A great leader is one who is terrified, but who forges on anyway, because the lives that rest on his or her shoulders are of far greater importance than the fear that overwhelms.” He waited a beat as Jared took that in. “Feeling the fear and doing it anyway. That’s what makes you the fearless leader that you already are.”

His lover played idly with his hands as he chewed on the words. Jensen let his eyes analyze the
Alpha’s features while he waited; taking in the strong cut jaw, the hazel eyes, the smooth, silken hair. Committing to memory the small bump on his nose, the long eyelashes, the soft lips. Reveling in the perfection that the angels had somehow seen fit to grace him with.

He would never tire of looking at the tall Alpha, and it always amused him that Jared never noticed the staring. At first, he thought that his boyfriend was sparing him the embarrassment of being caught. Then after a long while, he realized that his mate was simply oblivious to his observation, being that he was frequently staring at Jensen himself.

“Jen?” the softly murmured address brought him back from his thoughts.

“Mm?”

“Can I…can I ask you smething?” Jared mumbled hesitantly. Hearing the uncertainty in his lover’s voice, Jensen knew it was something very important to the Alpha, and to their relationship. Jared rarely expressed the doubts he had about them, mostly because he had very few, but he always got self-conscious when he did. So Jensen did the only thing he knew would make it easier.

He shimmied down the bed until he was level with Jared’s chest, then he turned and snuggled back in his Alpha. Jared automatically spooned him, relaxing visibly with the intimate embrace that, ironically enough, kept them from seeing each other’s faces. Jared was always more receptive under the cover of night, and only once his lover mellowed out, did Jensen consent.

“Anything. You can ask me anything, Jay.”

Jared toyed with Jensen’s hands as he took a moment to phrase his enquiry in his head. “Do you blame me?” he asked in a small voice. “For not standing up to my dad for you? Do you think that makes me weak?”

“No,” Jensen answered without any hesitation. “Jared, Eric is my foster father. We’re not biologically related, but I love him like we are. Over the past decade, he’s been nothing close to a father for me, but even with everything he puts me through…” Jensen shivered slightly, breaking off, because really, Jared didn’t know half the truth in that statement. “No matter what happened,” he finally continued, after a few soothing caresses from his Alpha, “I couldn’t, and still can’t desert him or write him off. He was my father, my best friend and my hero for a long time, and that perception of a person doesn’t go away with a few isolated incidents. That kind of love sometimes never goes away, the love between a kid and their parents is one of the most important forces in the world. So no,” he concluded, bringing the back of Jared’s hand briefly to his lips. “I don’t blame you at all, and I don’t think it makes you weak either. It just makes you a good son. A loving son.”

Jared kissed his neck in response. “I feel like I’m letting you down,” he confessed roughly. “Like I’m not protecting you because I’m afraid that standing up to my father will mean choosing between you both.”

“What if we can work it…”

“No,” his lover cut him off, “that’s exactly how I see things panning out, every time I think about it. My dad is as stubborn as they come. I would always choose you,” Jared quietly affirmed, “but the scared little kid inside me doesn’t want to lose his dad. His role model. His first hero.”

“You’re not going to.” Determination filled Jensen. “We’ll work this out. Just like we work everything else out.”

“You really think we can?”
He nodded emphatically, wanting to chase away all the doubts he heard in Jared's tone. “I think that love is a powerful thing. The compromises we make in its name often surprise us.” Jensen waited a moment before venturing a guess. “That’s what your nightmare was about, wasn’t it?” His voice was gentle and shrewd.

Jared hummed with a nod as the vibrations through his chest buzzed against Jensen’s back. “He killed you,” he revealed morosely. “You blamed me.”

His heart throbbed painfully at the anguish in Jared’s voice. For years, Jensen had dealt with his own demons and his own terrors, but soothing someone else’s nightmares? That wasn’t something he did very often, if at all. Uncertainty churned inside him- the one thing he knew would make Jared feel better, was something he’d never intended on telling Jared- but the need to comfort his mate overrode all his insecurities.

Gripping Jared’s hands tight in his, Jensen murmured, “When we first started going out, I had nightmares almost every day about Adam showing up and hurting you. Killing you. I woke up in a cold sweat, my face soaked with tears, wondering why the hell I was stuck in place, why the hell I didn’t save you from him.” Jared squeezed him closer, and he couldn’t help smiling at the gesture. “It took me a lot of sleepless nights, and a lot of helpless rage, but I finally realized that the thing keeping me from reacting, was the fear. That very same, all-consuming fear that didn’t allow me to defend myself when he was smashing his boot repeatedly into my ribs and legs and the side of my head. That kind of terror…it’s fucking potent, Jay. But that’s not my point,” Jen shook his head, feeling his hair brush inadvertently against Jared’s clavicle. “My point is that love has always been a stronger emotion than fear. Why should it be any different in our dreams, in our nightmares? Your subconscious is only being tortured because you don’t have the benefit of hating one party. You love me, and you love your dad, rightfully so. It sucks out loud that the love you give so freely, is what’s giving you nightmares, but Jay…I don’t want you to think on it, okay? You, your dad, and I will find a way around this, because conveniently enough, your dad loves you too much to hurt you like that. And I kinda like you too,” he added, grinning cheekily to himself, feeling Jared’s chuckle against his back. It was a welcome sound, second only to the feeling of Jared’s kiss on the nape of his neck as the tension slowly eased from the Alpha.

“How is it that you always know exactly what to say?” Jared husked, drawing shapes absently along the planes of Jensen’s stomach. “Always know exactly what I need, when I need it?”

“You make it easy on me,” Jensen answered without thinking. “You never ask anything of me that I can’t give you.” He hadn’t given it thought before, but the degree of truth in that statement shocked him. “Makes me want to give you everything in the world, and then some.”

“You do,” Jared breathed, nestling in the crook of Jensen’s neck. “Just by loving me, you do.”

Jensen sighed in contentment. “Then it’s a good thing I plan on loving you for an eternity.”

###

“Remember how you said you planned on loving me for an eternity?!” Jared blurted out breathlessly as he ducked another pillow flying towards his head. He sprinted out the door, a half-dressed Jensen hot on his heels.

“You told my brother that I was running away to become an exotic dancer!” Jensen bellowed, amusement battling with horror inside him. What the actual fuck was he going to tell Josh now?!

“I’m sorry!” his boyfriend apologized desperately through his laughter. “I left Chad to make the calls to your family!”
“Exactly!” They rounded the end of the hallway sharply, Jared narrowly missing a throw cushion. “What on earth were you thinking, asking Chad to do that?!!”

The Alpha dove behind the couch for cover. “I didn’t think!” he defended between giggles. “I’m sorry, Jen,” he held up his hands in a gesture of peace. “I’m sorry.”

Jensen stopped in front of him, poised to fling his newest weapon- a balled up afghan- straight at him. Jared took advantage of his momentary hesitation, tackling him and wrapping his arms around his midriff with a war cry that a toddler would have been proud of. He picked Jensen up in a fireman’s carry, shocking a guffaw out of the lean boy.

“Gotcha!” Jared crowed victoriously. “Say you forgive me,” he taunted with a grin, amused at Jensen’s helpless peals of laughter and the pounding on his back that hardly made an impact.

“Let me down, Jared, or I swear to God…”

“I gotta say, Freckles, I don’t think you’re in a position to be threatening right now.”

Jared whirled around at the sound of Kane’s exhausted, but happy voice. Bone-weariness was etched on the other alpha’s features, but there was unmistakable joy filling his normally cool blue eyes. Jared gently set him down and Jensen turned to face his pseudo-brother; though Jared had reassured him, he worried if Chris really didn’t blame him for everything that had happened. He honestly wouldn’t fault the boy if he did.

“Chris…” Jensen started, his entire demeanor softening. “I, um…”

Before he could stammer out any coherent words, Chris was crushing him in a hug so tight, he could hardly breathe.

Damn if he didn’t get with the program, and hold on just as tight.

“Don’t you do that to me again, Jen, you hear me?” Chris’ rough voice mumbled into his ear. “You’re my family, man, I can’t lose you too.” Jensen felt a droplet of moisture hit his exposed shoulder. “I can’t lose you too.”

His throat knotted up and he could do nothing except nod fervently, burrowing his face into Chris’ shoulder and finding a unique sort of comfort there; the comfort of a brother who would stand by him no matter what.

After a few minutes, they broke apart, only to find that Jared and Sophia had vacated, probably to the kitchen, in order to give them a few minutes of privacy. Jensen didn’t doubt that his lover had done this deliberately, creating an opportunity for him to have that talk with Kane, and he wasn’t sure whether he appreciated the thought or bristled at the implications.

Deciding that it was too soon for him to get irritable with the tall Alpha, Jensen simply sat on the couch, motioning for Chris to do the same. As though he sensed Jensen’s unease, Chris’ brow furrowed, but nevertheless he took a seat next to Jensen.

The green-eyed boy chewed on his lip for a few moments, trying to decide where to begin.

“If this is about your aunt,” Chris ventured a guess, “then I already know. I don’t blame you, Freckles, I promise.”

Jensen shot him a weak smile. “Thanks Chris,” he nodded quietly. “It feels great to hear you say that…but there’s something else. Katherine told me something else about the night your family was
killed, Chris.”

The alpha’s face twisted with concern, an uncharacteristic fear darkening his blue eyes. “What?” he asked almost hesitantly, clear vulnerability in his voice.

Jensen decided that the best way was to just rip off the band-aid. “Your mom…she was human, Chris. She was a human, and that’s why your family was targeted. It was just some random and hateful bigotry that triggered the attack.” To Jensen’s amazement, Chris’ face smoothed out and his shoulders relaxed.

“Oh, that?!” Chris breathed a relieved sigh, a small smile gracing his features. “I was a kid, Jen, but I was old enough to question why my mom never shifted with us, and why she couldn’t talk to us in our wolf forms.”

“You knew?” Jensen gaped at his best friend, feeling waves of relief almost stagger him. He had been so worried about how Chris would react to that piece of information…all for nothing it seemed.

“I knew,” Chris nodded, “but Hardison hadn’t put the dots together yet. I didn’t know that her being human was the motive behind that night,” he shook his head painfully, “but I knew Mom was a human. It’s a big part of the reason that I never really fit in the pack. For a long time, the elder generation was pretty dead set against humans.”

“What changed?” Jensen asked, getting momentarily side-tracked. “They all seem okay with me.”

Chris snorted, an affectionate gleam entering his eyes. “You came along,” he said simply. “You protected three of our cubs without knowing anything about us, outside of our existence. It opened a lot of their eyes to how loyal and caring and loving and kind the human race can be. Their prejudices began lessening the more you integrated yourself into our lives.”

“Me?” Jensen squeaked. His face burned bright red. “But I…”

“Don’t take Gerald Padalecki’s opinion of you as gospel, Freckles,” Chris interrupted him solemnly. “It takes someone special to change the elders’ minds without even trying. Gerald’s beliefs just go too far back, I think.”

“He’s just worried that the same thing will happen to Jared,” Jensen mumbled the same defense he’d given his boyfriend earlier. “He doesn’t want to lose his son to the narrow-minded ones of the Were kingdom.”

“Does Jared know?” Chris mouthed, and Jensen was heart-warmed to see his best friend trying to protect his boyfriend.

“I had to tell him,” Jensen confirmed with a nod. Something like pity crossed Kane’s eyes, and his gaze flicked towards the kitchen.

Without raising his voice, he commented, “I’m sorry you had to find out, Jared. If it helps, your dad really felt bad about the fact that we were too far away for him to help.”

Jared and Sophia came into the living room, Sophia making a beeline for Jensen. Once she’d hugged him to within an inch of his life, she returned to Chris’ side; a still silent Jared settled next to him, and Jensen grabbed his hand in unspoken support.

“I’m so sorry, Chris,” Jared muttered, heartfelt. It pained Jensen to see his boyfriend feeling so guilty for something that wasn’t his fault. “I had no idea.”
“I know,” Chris nodded with a ghost of smile on his face. “Your dad and I agreed that no one else was to know about it.”

Jared and Jensen’s heads snapped up at that. “Why?” Jared demanded, anger in his hazel eyes. “They deserved to know that his pig-headed narrow-mindedness was the cause of your family’s pain. They deserved to know that he allowed his personal bias to come in the way of the welfare of our pack!”

“Jay…” Jensen attempted to comfort his lover, putting an arm around him. Jared turned into him slightly, calming down, but unwilling to back down from his accusation.

“He messed up, baby,” Jared mumbled. “He needed to take responsibility for that.”

“He did.” Chris was the one who answered. “He took me in, made me independent, and gave me my rightful place in the pack.” Chris shook his head ruefully. “I’m not gonna lie, man, I hated your dad for a fucking long time. But my mom used to tell me and my little brother that we should never carry anger around with us. She would say it was like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” Chris smiled bitterly. “I forgave him, for her…but I also realized, a lot later, that your dad was repenting for his decision in ways that surpassed any punishment I could have given him. Like it or not, the reality is that he lost two pack members that night…and that killed him. The responsibility on his shoulders for their deaths? That’s been something he’s had to live with every single day since the night it happened. And he deserves that pain. That pain, but nothing else. Not your anger, or mine, or the pack’s. Just the knowledge that his pack brother died on his watch, all because of an unfounded old prejudice and his own stubbornness.”

Jensen was stunned in speechlessness. He knew he had to have a long chat with his pseudo brother soon, if nothing else, then to tell him just how fucking proud he was of him. He couldn’t imagine the type of strength it took for Chris to make peace with that, and he needed to know that Jen was proud of him…

…but his priority right now, was the almost imperceptibly trembling Alpha in his arms. He hadn’t given himself time to think about the effect this was going to have on Jared…he kicked himself inwardly for not realizing how much this had to hurt his lover. Chris shot him a look, and Jensen flicked his head towards the kitchen.

It was his turn to talk to Jared.

~*Jared*~

The emotions of the past few days had officially bubbled over the lid Jared had so valiantly fought to keep closed. He was experiencing hot and cold flushes with the force of all his repressed feelings, and he felt like he was about to explode. His head pounded and his breathing was becoming erratic, and he wondered briefly about how his mate was managing to keep a hold on himself for as long as he was.

He could feel self-recrimination pouring off Jensen in waves. “Stop feeling so guilty,” he offered roughly, his voice strained and cracking like the thin veil in front of his rampant emotions. “You were right to tell us.”

“I’m so sorry that I didn’t think about how this was going to affect you, Jay,” his mate murmured
ardently. “I messed up, I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

Jared shook his head, trying once last time to get a handle on himself. “Lives were lost that day,” he bit out, unintentionally harsh towards his mate. “Chris’ whole life got turned on its axis, and yours did too, only a few f*cking days ago! I’m being weak and irrational, feeling sorry for myself.”

Jensen wasn’t fazed by his snippy tone or his self-deprecation. Instead, his mate reached up and twisted his ear like he was a disobedient toddler, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to sting.

“What the hell, Jen?!”

“You’re more than entitled to feel the way you do, Jay,” he returned calmly, sensibly. Green eyes softened and Jared’s muscles relaxed when Jensen reached up to stroke his hair. A sense of tranquility filled him, his mate’s touch calming the raging storm inside him. “This is your father. Your hero. You have a right to your feelings, and don’t you ever think that you’re weak or irrational! Just because you’re allowing yourself to feel that pain, doesn’t make you weak.”

“What about you?” Jared pointed out, leaning his cheek into Jensen’s palm. He hated how petulant he sounded. “You don’t let your emotions get the better of you.”

“And you’re exponentially stronger than me for that,” Jensen retorted easily. “No, really,” he defended when Jared scoffed. “Anyone who’s been hurt before can hide and bury their emotions,” he shrugged. “It takes the real strong ones to get hurt, but still wear their heart on their sleeves. It’s one of the things I love most about you, and something I admire the most too.” Jared felt his chest warm up as Jensen aimed a smile at him. He hung on his mate’s words, drawing comfort and a modicum of strength from them. “Allowing yourself to face your emotions doesn’t make you weak, Jay…it makes you great.” Jared read the truth in Jensen’s words, and just like always, they gave him the kind of absolution he hadn’t even been aware he’d needed.

Pulling his mate in close to his body, Jared finally felt the tension of the past few days melt completely away from his body. Tiredness was left in its wake, and Jared tamped down a yawn.

Some of the pack would be here soon, to see Jensen, and he couldn’t leave his mate vulnerable to them.

As though summoned by the force of his thoughts, there came a rapping at the door. Jared pulled away reluctantly, shooing Jensen upstairs to put a shirt on- since there was no way any more people were going to be seeing Jared’s Jensen without more clothes on- and getting up to answer the door.

Chad, Jeff, Beaver, Genevieve and Danneel, all with varying degrees of concern, flooded into the house, without any prompting. “Come on in,” Jared muttered sarcastically, “make yourself at home.”

Jeff had taken up the rear of the little group, and stopped to grin at him. “You’re in a much better mood today, little brother,” he joked. “You’d think you’d be more hospitable now that Jen is up and at ’em.”

“Considering the fact that I could be ravishing Jen right now,” he stated bluntly, “you should be grateful I’m even letting you guys in the house.”

That garnered several choice responses from Beaver, Jeff and Chad, while the girls simply fanned themselves, giggling. Jared smirked despite himself when he saw the grimace his Chemistry professor and Healer was wearing.

“There are some things none of us need to be thinking about, son,” Jim told him gruffly, noticing his grin.
“Things like what?” Jensen’s teasing voice came from the staircase. Jared grinned when he saw the polar neck Jensen had chosen; even with the coverage, he spotted the tip of a purpling hickey just below Jensen’s jaw.

Before Beaver could answer, Jen was swamped by Gen and Danni, both of whom enveloped him in one big hug. They fuss ed over him, making sure he wasn’t hurt, and Jensen endured it patiently, reassuring him that everything was okay. Chad and Jeff started to go to him, but before they could, Chris and Sophia came back out of the kitchen.

Everything froze for a moment.

Jensen was quicker on the uptake than he was, Jared was chagrined to admit, but in the next second, his mate was standing in front of Chris, who was positioned protectively in front of Sophia. Jared quickly took up his place next to Jensen, hands out in a placatory gesture.

“Easy guys,” he soothed. “Sophia is okay.”

“She’s a part of the Morgan pack, Jared,” Chad hissed. “She’s Abel’s cousin! How is that defined as okay?”

Before Jared could defend her, Sophia piped up. “I’m not part of their pack. Not for much longer anyway.”

“She’s Chris’ mate,” Jensen added, his tone calm. “And I trust her. She’s given us no reason to believe that she would betray us. So, just cool it, guys, okay?”

The tension hung thick in the air for a few beats. Finally, it was Jeff’s cool voice that broke the silence. “Jared.”

Looking up at his big brother, he saw respect and love there, and a healthy degree of trust.

“Do you trust her?” he asked simply.

The symbolism of the moment hit him like a freight train. The question wasn’t directed at Jeff’s little brother; it was directed at the Padalecki Pack’s Alpha of the not-so-distant future. Loyalty and trust were etched on all of their faces, and Jared knew that they would follow him without question. He glanced down at Jensen; his mate was smiling softly, proudly, the significance of the question not lost on him. Jen winked at him, the love and pride as clear as the message in his eyes; I’ll always be right here, next to you, Alpha.

Nodding slightly to himself, he faced his pack once more.

“I trust her.”

~*Jensen*~

Everyone settled down fairly easily, save for the Sophia Incident. Sparing them the details he’d plied Jared with, Jensen explained his newfound ancestry to the small group; if anyone, they all had a right to know about it.

Beaver, of course, was more excited than a toddler at Christmas. “This is something that’s never
been documented in our history before,” he emphasized. “This could change all our preconceptions about cross-species matings forever! We’ve got to run some chemical-based tests, see if there’s any biological manifestations of the oddity...”

“My mate and I are not gonna be your fucking experiment, Jim,” Jared growled, and Jensen smiled at the protective arm that was slung around his shoulder.

“Jay,” he soothed quietly, wanting to avoid an argument, “let it go. Mr Beaver didn’t mean anything by it. Scientifically, we are an anomaly, and I can understand his academic perspective.” He turned to Beaver, smirking lightly. “But at the same time, we’re not going to be lab rats, Sir. There are other ways to test the parameters I know you’re thinking of.”

The older man smiled sheepishly, and the expression was so out of place that Jensen had to laugh. Jared calmed down next to him, and Jensen entertained Chad’s never-ending slew of questions about whether or not he was anything like the little boy in sixth sense.

It took a while to convince Chad that he didn’t actually see a dead person yet. Just heard them.

“Jensen?”

He turned to face Jim, who was frowning at him quizzically. “Yes?”

“I never got around to asking you, and I’m dying of curiosity,” he stated baldly. “How did you figure out that you were in that herbicide factory?”

“I meant to ask you that too, baby,” Jared piped up. “I know you were close to that Church, but how did you figure you were in a herbicide factory, and not any of the other ones?”

Jensen grinned ruefully. “The smell,” he revealed with a chuckle. Leaning against Jared, he looked at Beaver, eyes sparkling. “Trimethylamine. It’s a chemical used in the synthesis of plant growth regulators or herbicides, known for the distinctive smell it carries, of rotting fish. The smell threw me off at first, made me think I was near fresh water, but when Jared mentioned the herbicide factory, I remembered the chemical. It also explained why the smell was so harsh, and sharp.”

Jim chuckled disbelievingly. “You might as well take up the post as the Chem professor from Monday, son.”

Jensen huffed a laugh with everyone else, only half listening to their comments, focused instead on the warmth of the pride that was radiating off Jared. His Alpha leaned down from where he was perched on the armrest of the couch, dropping a kiss on his forehead.

“Incredible,” Jared whispered, making him blush.

“Hey Jense,” Chad tapped his arm lightly to get his attention. His blue eyes were serious, and that more than anything made Jensen sit up and pay attention. “Have you decided what’s going to happen to the relative-from-Hell?”

His heart stuttered, before picking up double time. “What do you mean?” He looked up to see Jared scowling at his friend. “Jay?”

Jared’s face softened and he caressed the side of Jensen’s neck. “We tranquilized your Aunt, love. She’s chained up in Jim’s basement. I thought that you should decide what happened to her.”

Jensen fought back a shudder. Surprisingly enough, he knew the answer to that without much thinking on his part. “I won’t,” he shook his head. “Chris is the only one who deserves to have that
decision. She’s the one who…” he glanced up at his brother and best friend, softened at the pain that was stark in his blue eyes. “Hopefully, deciding her fate will bring you even the smallest bit of closure.”

“I can’t do that,” Chris shook his head sharply. At Jensen’s confused disbelief, he added, “I can’t put you through that, Freckles. I can’t do what would be good for me, if it makes you grieve.”

Jensen rose from where he was sitting. Crouching so that he was eye-level to Chris, he clasped the other boy’s shoulder. “She’s not the Aunt I remember, Chris,” he said lowly. “She’s not the woman my mom left behind when she died, either. Whatever happens to her now, is water off my back.”

Chris considered this for a long moment, and Jensen kept his gaze steadily, allowing his friend to see the firmness of his decision in his eyes. Finally, Kane leaned forward to hug him tightly. “Thanks, Freckles,” he whispered, and Jensen was annoyed at the fact that he was choking up again. He really needed to stop crying.

“I guess the question then,” Chad spoke quietly, “is what you want to do with her, Kane. I mean, I hate to taint the reunion,” he shot an apologetic look at Jensen, “but we can’t ignore the issue much longer.”

Jensen smiled wanly, not wanting Chad to feel any guilt. He understood the concern; they had waited five days too long for him to wake up, and the longer she was alone, the more time she had to try to escape. Jensen wouldn’t be able to stand any more bloodshed of his friends and family in his name.

“I don’t want to kill her,” Chris said slowly. “I don’t want to taint my family’s memory like that. My mom would never want me to play executioner.” He was quiet for several long moments, and Jensen used the opportunity to cross the room, back into the comforting proximity of his Alpha. Jared wrapped his arms around him, and he leaned into the touch gratefully, taking strength from the pride that resonated from his lover.

“I want her to live a long life as the one thing she’s come to detest,” Chris finally decided. He directed his verdict at Jim Beaver. “I want her to be turned back into a human.”

Jensen blinked, confusion swamping him at the sweeping statement. “That’s possible?” he asked sharply. “Reverse transformations?”

Jim nodded slowly, fixing him with a worried look. “It’s a biological process, so it’s possible, but it’s an excruciating process. Very few, only a handful, have ever survived the transformation, and most of those ones were born Were. Her chances are significantly decreased because she was a changed Were.”

“Good,” Jensen bit off, his carefully bottled up anger rearing its head for a moment before he forced a steel blanket of composure over himself again. Jared’s hand found his, and Chad reached over to ruffle his hair, offering his own unique brand of comfort.

Unable to stand the seriousness for much longer, Jensen reached up and punched Chad in the chest, just this side of painful.

“What the hell?” Chad shot him a wounded look, pouting ridiculously. Jensen smirked tiredly.

“That’s for telling my brother that I was running away to become an exotic dancer.”

###
Thanks again for reading, and let me know what you think. More reveals and we'll deal with the traitor in the next chapter! <3

Jay
A slight tapping on the door interrupted the lazy evening they were having.

Jared growled ferociously a second later, standing up. Jensen narrowed his eyes at his lover; he knew Jared was kicking all their asses in Monopoly, but instinct told him that it was something else entirely that had his Alpha that riled up.

His suspicions were confirmed when all the other wolves stood up too, Chris none-too-gently moving him to stand behind Jared. Before he could protest, Jared grabbed his hand.

“It’s Sandy,” the Alpha told him in a clipped voice, and suddenly, the tension made a lot more sense. He laid a calming hand on his boyfriend’s shoulder, trying to send out soothing emotions over their mating bond, which was going crazy with Jared’s anxiety and anger.

Jensen pressed a kiss to the spot underneath Jared’s jaw. “Whatever it is, we can handle it,” he stated serenely. He knew that he would be just about the only thing that could keep Jared from attacking his psycho ex- the protectiveness of a mate was something he understood all too well now- and more to the point, he never wanted Jared to alienate anyone in his pack. It was dangerous to have a single, disloyal member in a pack. He may not have lived a pack life, but he lived in a gang life, for what felt like a lifetime, and from his experience, he knew that loyalty was the one thing that could make or break any one group of people.

Damned if the Padalecki pack would break because Sandra McCoy couldn’t respect the mating boundaries.

Ignoring the wolves who were trying to block his path, Jensen weaved through them with embarrassing ease, heading for the door.
Sandy looked surprised - as though she hadn’t expected anyone to answer the door - and the surprise quickly gave way to nervousness when Jared appeared at his back. She palmed the nape of her neck, looking like she didn’t know how she was going to start explaining what brought her to their door.

It was times like these when Jensen really hated his own capacity for compassion.

He opened the door wider, softening his features and pulling Jared behind him, not wanting his mate to lash out. “It’s cold out tonight. You should come in,” he offered, his voice surprisingly steady. “I doubt the words would come to you any easier if you were out here, rather than inside.”

Sandy smiled hesitantly at him, and Jensen was taken aback at the genuine remorse and gratitude he saw in her eyes. As she made her way to their living room, Jared remained a constant, menacing presence at his side, not verbally acknowledging the petite beta’s existence. She paused when she was met with the wall of his angry friends, all of them looking ready to shift, and turned back to face him.

“I was wondering if I could talk to you,” she spoke shyly. A tentative expression crossed her face, but she forced her gaze to remain on his. “Alone.”

“Not a fucking chance,” Jared growled immediately, before he could even register what she was asking of him. “What the hell kind of angle are you playing here?”

Sandy flinched, cowering in deference to the Alpha baritone that was leaking into his lover’s voice. “No angle, I promise,” she squeaked. “I just need to…to talk to Jensen. Just give me five minutes, please.”

“You have a lot of nerve coming here,” Chris stepped forward angrily.

“Yeah.” Surprisingly, it was Chad backing Chris up, the taut lines on his normally friendly face speaking volumes about his own irritation. “You come into their home, and ask Jen to give you the time of day after everything you did to him.” Chad shook his head in disgust, and Jared tensed, coming forward and shielding Jensen with his body.

“Tell me” Jared challenged, “why I shouldn’t throw you out right the fuck now, for even daring to ask anything of him.”

“Jay,” Jensen tried to soothe the Alpha’s anger, grasping his hand. “What if this is something pack-related?”

“It’s about your brother.”

The softly spoken words made Jensen’s eyes snap to her. “You’ve got your five minutes,” he told her grimly, walking towards the kitchen but not letting go of Jared’s hand. “But Jared comes with. There’s nothing I’d hide from him.”

Sandy followed him, uneasy though she was about his compromise. Jensen tried not to think about the fact that the pack would be able to hear them if they were inclined to try.

“What happened to Josh?” he asked, cutting to the chase. “Is he hurt?”

Sandy shook her head. “No. But someone…” she hesitated, rocking back and forth on her heels. “He knows about the existence of our kind,” she finally blurted.

Jensen paled, leaning against Jared for support lest his knees give out. “What…” he breathed, feeling like he’d been sucker-punched. “Who?” he managed to get out. “How?”
Sandy shrugged. “I don’t know.” Her eyes widened, pulse jumping in her throat. “I swear to God,” she shook her head, “I’ve got nothing to do with this.”

“How did you know?” Jared asked in a hard voice, his tone contrasting sharply to the tender circles his hands were making into Jensen’s hip bones.

Sandy flinched again, a little more imperceptibly this time. “I was with him. I took him to Jensen’s home town.”

This time, Jensen’s knees did give out. He stumbled to a chair, his head spinning, the only rational thought being to hold on to Jared’s hand to keep him from ripping McCoy apart.

“You were the one who told him who helped him try to break Jensen and me up.” Jared’s voice was pure steel. “What the fuck did you come here for? Forgiveness?”

“No.” Sandy shook her head sadly, and it didn’t take Were senses to know that she was lying. “I came here because Josh knew more than I had ever told him. Someone else told him about our existence, and no one will listen to me in the pack.” Her big eyes set back on Jensen, looking at him pleadingly. “We are dealing with a traitor,” she implored. “Lives are at stake here.”

“Why did you want to see me alone?” Jensen asked, after taking a minute to get his breathing under control. “You could just as well have told me this in front of the pack. They’re the ones directly affected, and I’d wager they already knew about this anyway.” He aimed a stern glance at his boyfriend, who had the grace to glance away sheepishly. He returned his focus to the Queen Bitch. “What else were you hoping to get out of this?”

Her answer made him glad that he was already sitting down.

“I wanted to apologize.” At the dumbfounded look on his face, she laughed, self-deprecatingly. “I know, it’s far too little, and far too late. But I just wanted to tell you I was sorry. Mating is a wonderful and beautiful thing. Somewhere along the line, I forgot that. I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness, but I wanted you to know that I regret everything I ever did to you.”

Jensen was struck speechless, but that was okay, because apparently, Sandy didn’t really expect an answer. She stood up, nodded at him with clear apology in her eyes, and left. Jensen was aware of it when his friends migrated to the kitchen, but each of them seemed willing to let him get his thoughts in order.

“How long did you know about the traitor in the pack?” he asked hollowly, not really directing his question at anyone.

“Since the night before we found you,” Jared answered quietly, a guilty lilt to his voice.

Jensen wanted to be mad at him, but he knew what they had all been through in the past few weeks, Jared most especially. The Alpha didn’t need anything more complicating his life, and Jensen found it was easy to overlook Jared’s secret on account of the protectiveness that he knew had prompted the decision.

He took his Alpha’s hand, feeling Jared’s new tension drain as he did. “I’ll talk to Josh tomorrow. Maybe he’ll tell me who the hell this freak is, and we can sort it out from there.” Looking around at the somber faces of his friends, he produced a wan smile. “Until then, I move that we switch from Monopoly to good old fashioned Twister.”

It might not have been the most subtle diversionary tactic, but when Jensen found himself in a human pretzel with Jared, Chad and Danneel, with shouts of laughter echoing around him, he figured it
didn’t really matter.

They could all do with a night off.

###

“How?”

Jensen blinked at the sudden question. Jared stared at him with a perplexed frown on his face, pillow clutched to his chest and looking more like a curious toddler than a bewildered Alpha Were. Sensing that something was on his Alpha’s mind, Jensen stopped fitting their bed with a clean sheet, straightening slowly and arching an eyebrow in silent question.

“How are you keeping all those emotions under control?” he clarified, the furrow between his brows deepening. “You’ve gotta be ready to explode with everything you’ve handled and been through.”

The ghost of a smirk flirted with Jensen’s lips. “Practice,” he answered truthfully. “For so many years, there were so many more things to worry about. There wasn’t any time for me to break down or lose control; someone needed to keep us alive. So I learned to bury it all, and let it sort itself out in time.”

“The Padalecki family is pretty big on emotions,” Jared wrinkled his nose, not moving from his position as Jensen resumed his task. “My momma probably would have beat our pent up emotions out of us with her trusty wooden spoon.”

Jensen chuckled fondly. “Your momma loves you, Jay,” he shook his head. “And it sounds like a motherly thing, actually. Jodi probably would have done the same to me.” He kept his eyes down, not wanting to convey the pain he knew he wouldn’t be able to remove from his green eyes. “She always hated when I was pretending not to be upset about something.”

Jared moved from his position with quick, long strides, abandoning the pillow and cuddling Jensen instead. He allowed himself to sink into the Alpha’s comforting embrace, feeling safe enough in the place he’d come to think of as their home, to let his guard down and be soothed. Jared nuzzled his neck, and even without the mating bond, he would have been able to feel the empathy radiating off his lover.

“I could get my momma to beat you with her spoon, if that’ll make you feel better,” Jared teased softly, kissing his neck and surprising a laugh out of Jensen.

“Tempting as that sounds,” he rejoined drily, tucking Jared’s hair behind his ear, “I’m going to have to pass.” He considered the tall Alpha for a moment, his green eyes shrewdly roving over the features he’d come to love in such a short time. Jared stared back unflinchingly, content to return the gaze and allow him time to gather his thoughts. Finally, Jensen added softly, “You know, there’s still one thing that sends all my carefully cultivated control skills out the fucking window.”

“What?” Jared asked, tipping his head to the side in intrigue.

“You.”

When his lover’s confusion only seemed to multiply, Jensen chuckled lightly, and continued to dress the bed while he elaborated. “I haven’t ever thought rationally when it came to you, Jay, and I honestly don’t think I’ll ever be able to. I can’t control any emotion when it concerns you; I don’t make sensible decisions, and I don’t often think further than my own nose. In a normal scenario, I’d know every possible outcome of any given situation. In a Jared-scenario… I don’t even think I’d need to know the entire situation before jumping in, head-first.”
“That’s because we’re mates, and because you’re madly in love with me.” Jared was practically preening next to him, although Jensen was fairly certain that it was more for his amusement than anything, since he could feel the tenderness through their bond.

Still, he rose to the bait. “I only keep you around because you’re pretty,” he leered with a grin. Instead of a protest, Jared simply puffed his chest outwards, a glint of mischief in his eyes.

“And because I’m hung like a…”

“Jared!” Jensen spluttered, going beet red despite his helpless laughter. By the grin on the Alpha’s face and the amusement in his slanted hazel eyes, Jared wasn’t about to acquiesce this argument, and contrary to popular belief, Jensen knew when he was beat. “Fine,” he gave a heavily put-upon sigh, getting into bed and biting back his laughter when Jared vaulted over him and settled himself under the covers too. “You’re the hottest, most…well-proportioned, Alpha this side of the equator, and I’m crazy in love with you,” he dead-panned.

Jared smiled brilliantly, and after seeing him in pain earlier in the afternoon, the happiness was a sight that Jensen would give up a thousand arguments for.

“It’s okay,” Jared teased him, spooning him close. “I’m just as enamored and star-struck by you, my pretty little mate.”

###

It was more difficult than Jensen expected it to be, leaving Jared the next morning. It had been easy enough for them to discuss their respective plans- Jared needing to see Jeff and Jensen needing to see Josh and Eric- but in practice? It felt like he was floating in zero gravity without Jared as his tether.

His lover was no better off- Jensen could feel the tension in Jared’s body that didn’t dissipate no matter how hard Jensen tried to distract him. It was like he was afraid Jensen would disappear again, and it was largely thanks to this knowledge that Jensen made the decision to go alone. He knew Jared’s nightmares would continue until they faced the root cause of his distress- losing Jensen- and he thought that making it back in one piece would prove to Jared that Fate wasn’t conspiring to tear them apart.

Jensen could admit that it was a thin, flimsy plan. But it was all he had.

Concerned as he was about his Alpha being tense and stressed out, Jensen had completely forgotten to be worried about his own visit to see Eric and his brother.

Maybe if he’d been a little less preoccupied, he’d have seen coming, the events that were about to unfold.

At least, that was his best excuse for standing in his doorway, frozen in place at the sight of Josh and Eric in the living room, both of them with grim expressions on their faces.

“I, uh…” he fumbled, closing the door behind him and feeling foreboding creep into his awareness. “I guess there isn’t much to be done, in the way of introductions,” he shrugged weakly.

“We’re not here because you didn’t tell me your brother tracked you down and came to find you,” Eric told him, the surprisingly gentle tone easing some of his discomfort. His foster father looked like he was torn between wrapping Jensen in blankets and feeding him ice-cream, and packing their stuff and hightailing it to the next state.

“Why are we here then?” he asked slowly, casting a sharp gaze over his brother. Josh was tense, and
Jensen wondered why he felt like he was facing the firing squad.

“We’re here,” Josh interjected his thoughts, “because we don’t want you seeing Jared anymore. It isn’t safe.”

~*Jared*~

“I honestly didn’t think you’d come, little brother.”

Jeff beamed at him, standing up as soon as Jared was within hugging distance. The Alpha felt a bit of guilt, on account of how happy his brother was to see him. Sure, they’d spent time together just the previous night, but as much as the board games were fun, he hadn’t really spent any quality time with Jeff, not since his brother had watched him nearly die.

So the guilt was somewhat warranted, at least.

“Dad’s on some mystery pack errand, Mom and Meg are out shopping…it’s the perfect time to be home,” Jared returned almost bitterly.

Jeff shot him a look that was half sympathetic, half reproachful. “They all miss you Jare,” he said almost gently. “Mom, Meg, the pack…Dad, even though he’d never come out and say it. My point is that you shouldn’t be punishing everyone because you’re clashing with him.”

“Jeff…” Jared shook his head stubbornly. “No one deserves to be treated like Dad treated Jensen, least of all my mate. I miss the whole family too, Dad included, but nothing can come before the well-being of my mate.” He glanced sharply up at his brother. “I’d expect you of all people to understand that.”

“I hear you,” Jeff conceded. “After the way dad treated Valerie, I was livid, and I imagine it was worse for Jensen, him being human and all.” Jeff took a measured breath, seeming to think carefully about his words. “Thing is, though, is that you’re the Padalecki pack’s future Alpha. That was in the works even before I left with Val; I knew it, Mom knew it, the pack knew it…it was just Dad that needed to get the memo. I don’t know who the pack is going to look to once Dad steps down, if not you.”

Jared crossed his arms, his jaw set. “So what do you suggest Jeff?” he asked sharply. “You want me to put the pack over and above my mate, the one person who is more than the world to me?”

Jeff didn’t miss a beat. “I don’t know why you keep thinking that Jensen and the pack are two separate entities.” Jeff leveled him with a small smile. “Whether you change him or not, Jensen became an honorary pack member a long time ago. Once again, Dad is just spectacularly late to the party.”

Shaking his head as if to clear it, Jared asked, “And you think I can somehow convince Dad to accept Jensen?”

“I think Jensen can somehow convince Dad to accept Jensen,” Jeff corrected.

“You lost me, bro.”

Jeff leaned forward patiently. “What do all Alphas respect most especially in any human being?”
“Backbone?” Jared phrased his answer as a question, wondering idly whether his brother would grade his response with an appropriately sarcastic remark.

“Exactly.” If the tone of Jeff’s voice was anything to go by, Jared passed with flying colors. “And does Jensen have backbone?”

“More than half the wolves in our pack.” This answer, Jared was a hundred and ten percent sure of.

Returning to his original position, Jeff smirked. “Then explain to me why you keep dancing them around each other.”

Jared stared at his brother. “You can’t honestly be suggesting what I think you’re suggesting.”

“Put them in the proverbial room together.”

The Alpha blanched at the thought. “I knew you were a little touched in the head, bro, but this really takes the cake.”

“You think your mate can’t handle Dad?” Jeff challenged.

Jared bristled at the implicated insult to his Jen. “Any day of the week and twice on Sundays,” he retorted defensively. “That doesn’t mean I want to put him in Dad’s line of fire.”

“And that’s better than what you’re doing now?” Jeff pointed out. “Keeping them separate and creating a rift in yourself?” Jared didn’t answer, and he felt more than saw it, when Jeff softened his features. “How are you gonna know unless you try, Jare? Who knows, maybe Jensen tells Dad to take a hike, and the Alpha in him decides to adopt Jensen and attempt to turn him into the new Alpha.”

Jared huffed a grudging laugh at that. “You’ve got optimism that would make Dora the fucking Explorer jealous, Jeff.”

“Damn it, Jare,” Jeff’s lips pulled back in a momentary snarl. “I fucking hate that show, and that chick. She’s the spawn of the devil, man.”

~*Jensen*~

He looked between his brother and Eric, trying in vain to determine whether Josh had told Eric about the Weres. “What the hell are you talking about?” he finally pushed the words out, forcing his voice to stay level.

“Your brother tells me that Jared might be up to no good, Jen,” Eric told him gently, as though he were delivering the line to a fragile and traumatized man.

Jensen blinked slowly, realizing that Josh hadn’t given up the big secret, if only for the fact that he still thought Jensen didn’t know. The nervousness dissipated, washed away with relief and quickly blinded by anger.

“Now, I know you can take care of yourself,” Eric continued, oblivious to Jensen’s mounting fury. “More so than any of us, probably. Nevertheless, I don’t want you in danger.”

“What happened to ‘he looks at you like I used to look at your mother’?” Jensen asked bitterly, jaw
clenching with the force of his anger. “I thought you liked Jared!”

“That was before I knew he was involved in things that could land up with you hurt,” Eric answered promptly. “Son, you’re still underage, and I’m still your father, and I don’t want you to see that boy again.”

Eric said it so matter-of-factly, as though it were as easy as that, and Jensen realized that to him, it probably did seem so. Jared and him were together for a few months now, and although it had felt like he’d known the Alpha his whole life, he struggled to remember that wasn’t the case.

He had said, though, that Jared was his weak spot in his logic.

“So now you’re my father, now that it suits you?” he snapped without thinking. “That’s rich.”

“Jensen!” Eric turned pale as a sheet, and the green-eyed boy cursed loudly. Hurt was clear in his foster father’s eyes, and as much as he could blame the man for the past ten years, Eric was absolutely devoid of blame here.

He made himself soften, guilt tamping down the fury for a moment. “Dad, I’m sorry,” he sighed, unconsciously calling Eric in a way he hadn’t in long years. “I didn’t mean that. Just…I need you to trust me. I need you to trust that I’m old enough to make my own decisions, and that I know what I’m doing. Please don’t make me choose.”

His unspoken words hung heavily in the air; I’ll choose him.

After a few long beats that felt like a whole lifetime to Jensen, Eric nodded. The hurt was gone, replaced by fear, resignation and a tiny bit of awe. Jensen managed a small smile, coming forward to hug his foster father briefly, for the first time in longer than he cared to remember.

Pulling away, he refocused on his rage. He narrowed his eyes at Josh. “You and I need to talk.”

He walked out, knowing without looking that his brother was going to follow him. He went to Josh’s beat up green Ford, getting into the passenger’s seat and slamming the door pointedly.

“Jense…”

“Not now,” he interrupted his brother crisply. “I need to make a list of how many things I’m gonna yell at you for.”

As meekly as though Jensen had scolded one of the pups he’d babysat, Josh turned the key in the ignition, driving to the park near his school. Jensen shot off a text to Chris, knowing that he couldn’t endure the ride back with his brother. By this time, he had built up a full head of steam, and as soon as he was out of the car, he was lacing into his brother.

“Where in the hell do you think you get off, Josh?” he demanded, a dangerous glint in his normally soft green eyes. “First of all, and let me not mince my words here, you do not get to dictate my life to me, especially not like you tried to do today! You haven’t been a part of my life for sixteen years. Now, I can appreciate you trying to connect with me again, but let me tell you, I’ve lived my life relatively okay for all those sixteen years without your overprotective brother bullshit! Jared has tried to be civil to you, but you are just determined to hate him, and I’m sick of it, Josh. I am sick of it!” Jensen stopped, breathing heavily and feeling little to no empathy for his wide-eyed brother.

“Jensen, I…”

“What?” he asked, his voice going quiet, laden with disappointment and resentment. “You’re sorry?
You weren’t thinking? Nothing you say will make a lick of difference, Josh, so stop trying.”

“There are things you don’t know, Jen,” Josh tried to plead with him.

Jensen forced himself to get a handle on his emotions. He needed information, and he wasn’t going to get anything from Josh if he flew off the handle again. He could keep it together until he had the necessary information…for Jared and the pack.

“What don’t I know, Josh?”

His brother looked relieved at finally being given a chance to explain. “This is gonna sound crazy, little brother, but I swear it’s true. They’re…they’re all…” Josh took a deep breath. “They’re *werewolves*, Jen.”

Jensen kept his expression carefully blank. “Werewolves.”

“I know how it sounds!” his brother huffed, beginning to protest. “This guy though, he came up to me and told me that he was part of Jared’s pride, or pack, or whatever. He shifted forms in front of me, Jen! He told me that Jared *hated* humans, and that he was trying to *overthrow the human race* by using you!”

Jensen thought he was doing an excellent impression of a fish just then. “He...you…” he struggled to find the words. “You believed him?” he finally managed.

“I told you, he shifted…”

“Not about the werewolves,” he waved his hand dismissively. “About taking over the world and using me to do it.”

Josh had the decency to look sheepish. “Well, yeah, I mean...he was telling the truth about being a werewolf.”

“So you thought that there was truth in the thought that Jared was going to use me to take over the world?” Jensen struggled with the thought, barely able to comprehend. “You do realize that the human populace probably loops the Were populace about three or four times?” he asked almost gently.

“That doesn’t mean…”

“And you know that I have *no* kind of sway over the humans or the wolves, making me the *least valuable* weapon in a bid to overthrow mankind?”

“You’re not…”

“And above everything else, you’re aware that this sounds like the plot to a bad movie?”

Josh finally deflated, chewing his lip as he took Jensen’s words in. “Well, when you put it like that...” he grumbled. Suddenly, he straightened. “Jensen...why aren’t you surprised that I just told you that your boyfriend is a werewolf?”

Sighing, Jensen leaned against the hood of his brother’s car. “I knew,” he said simply.

Josh looked at him, shell-shocked. “I...God, I can’t believe...” he was working quickly up to anger. “I was agonizing over this, Jensen! I was so...God, I was afraid I was going to hurt you all over again! I got you that silver knife to protect you, and you couldn’t even be bothered to warn me...”
So that’s where the silver knife at the club came from.

“I didn’t need to,” Jensen interrupted evenly. “You were never in any danger. I know those wolves, all of them, and they wouldn’t ever hurt you.”

“Jensen,” Josh scoffed, “he is a monster!! He…”

The elder Ackles didn’t get any more words out before he found himself slammed into the side of his car, Jensen’s hand knotted in the front of his shirt.

“Don’t you ever talk about him like that again,” Jensen snarled a warning. “I love him, Josh. He is my family.”

A hurt look crossed the familiar features. “And I’m not?”

Jensen backed away slowly, his emotions simmering just below his skin. He was done playing demure, since Josh was evidently not going to give up his source- not while he was hurting, at least.

“Listen to me very carefully, Josh,” he stated, almost coldly. “Jared is the love of my existence. Chris and Chad are my brothers. Every last member of that pack has a place in my family. You do too, but not if you keep trying to separate me from them.” His eyes hardened along with his tone. “They’re my family, and I will fight the world for them, tooth and nail. I’ll love Jared until the day I die, and after that, too. Nothing you say, or do, can change that. You can either accept them and become the big brother I lost sixteen years ago, or you can leave. Leave, and never come back. I’ll do what I have to do, in order to protect them, so never make the mistake of hurting any of them. Least of all, Jared.”

He took a step back, hating to hurt his brother, but unwilling to let Josh ruin the family he’d come to love as his own.

“I love you, Josh,” he told the older boy sincerely. “But I love them too. I love Jared, and Chris, and Chad, and Danneel, and Genevieve, and Misha, and Tom, and all the pups, and everyone else that made me part of their family without so much as a blink of their eyes. You’d do well to remember that.”

“You’re choosing Jared over me?” Josh asked sadly.

“It was never a choice,” Jensen responded with raw honesty. “It was always him. It is always him.”

Josh absorbed what he was saying, moving slowly backwards. “I need to go, then,” he spoke painfully. “I’ll…I guess I just…I just need to decide whether I’ll be back.”

“You’ll always be my brother, Josh,” Jensen added quietly. “But if you want to be my family, you know where to find me.”

Josh nodded jerkily, tears streaming from the green eyes that were so like his own. As the Ford pulled away, Jensen heard a car door slam.

Chris, most probably. Thank God.

That notion was discarded the moment a voice carried over to Jensen.

“That was a truly touching performance.”

Oh, fuck.
Chapter End Notes

Who’s the mystery voice?!

Also, I posted the epilogue to my superhero story, No Mary-Jane Watson. Hope you guys check it out! Hope you enjoyed!
Concussion are Great for Big Revelations

Chapter Notes

Okay, first off, time is not on my side today! I promise to reply to all comments of the previous chapter ASAP! Sorry guys! *puppy eyes* *hugs*

Secondly, (drum roll please) I just realized that today marks exactly one year since I started posting this fic! HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, my beautiful, wonderful readers! Yay! *celebrates*, I'm so honored to have been amidst all you awesome people, who never fail to humble me so. Love you guys! <3 <3

This chapter, an especially long one, this one's for all you fantastic people, who have taken this journey with me <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Chad*~

Fucking school…giving us catch up work…we were totally saving Jen’s ass! But no, apparently that’s not a good enough excuse to miss Calculus.

A frown formed on Chad’s face, his disgruntlement increasing in tandem with his rant. Not for the first time, he wished that the Were population wasn’t such a big secret; maybe then, they would cut him, Jared and Kane some kind of slack for saving Jen and in so doing, missing two days of class.

Muttering under his breath about the total irrelevance of limits and integrals, it hit his nose by surprise when he stepped out of the school doors to smell Jensen.

This in itself wouldn’t have been worrying, but when he caught the other scent in the air, the blood in his veins froze.

He needed to get Jared here, fucking pronto.

He tracked the scent, stalking forward. He couldn’t see Jensen, but he could finally hear what was going on.

“…very carefully, Josh,” he heard Jensen saying as he rooted around in his pocket for his cellphone. “Jared is the love of my existence. Chris and Chad are my brothers. Every last member of that pack has a place in my family. You do too, but not if you keep trying to separate me from them.”

Chad almost face-planted when he heard that. His hand hovered over his cell’s keypad for a moment, shock immobilizing him as he heard the rest of what Jen had to say.

…they’re my family…

…fight the world for them…

…love Jared until the day I die…
do what I have to do in order to protect them…

love Jared, and Chris, and Chad, and Danneel, and Genevieve, and Misha, and Tom, and all the pups…

never a choice. It was always him.

In eighteen years, Chad Michael Murray had managed to avoid most everything emotional with an obnoxious remark or a casual shrugging off. He could count on both hands, the amount of times he’d reacted emotionally to anything.

Now?

His eyes stung unfamiliarly with the burn of tears and his throat felt like it was clogged with cotton wool. His chest was on fire, and he damned the green-eyed boy for the place he’d managed to carve for himself, just inside all of his walls and barriers.

He knew that Jensen loved his best friend. That much was obvious, even to a man who was blind in both eyes and partially deaf. He knew that Jen would kill and die for Kane, and that their brotherly bond was the same brand of phenomenal as his and Jared’s, maybe even more so if he was forced to be objective.

He also knew that Jensen cared about him.

Never though, had he once imagined that it was more than just befriending his mate’s best friend. He knew that he had come to see Jen as a friend too, but it hadn’t occurred to him that Jensen felt similarly. To hear the boy refer to him as a brother, say that he loved him and would protect him…it made something in his chest burn bright and fierce. Love and loyalty that he had no idea he was capable of feeling for anyone outside of pack, blossomed deep inside him, and though he knew it at a surface-level before, he now also knew deep in his bones that he would defend, protect, care for his brother with every fiber of his being.

His pack brother.

Because really, there was no plausible denial of how firmly integrated one Jensen Ross Ackles was in the Padalecki Pack.

Determination set back in, and he pushed his emotions to the side as he heard Jen’s brother leave. Jabbing his finger down on 3, he speed-dialed his best friend, brother and future Alpha.

“Jay-rod…we got a problem.”

~*Chris*~

Hey bro…sorry, man, but could you come get me please? At the park we came to when we ditched. Will explain.

Chris grimaced as he read the text. Every bit the aggravating little brother, Jensen more often than not tried to solve things alone. That he was calling on him, meant that the shit had really hit the fan. Chris’ heartbeat sped up, his mind imagining the various binds his brother could have gotten himself into. Long hair notwithstanding, with Jensen’s penchant for trouble, Chris wondered how long it
would take before he pulled out every last strand from anxiety.

“You’re gonna be the death of me, little brother,” he muttered worriedly, a knot forming in his stomach. Without hesitation, he grabbed his jacket and his keys, throwing a shout over his shoulder. “Hey, Soph?”

His gorgeous mate stuck her head out into the hallway, a sweet smile on her face. Chris still couldn’t believe how lucky he was to have such an amazing woman as his mate, and he was momentarily struck by her beauty and his fortune. “Yeah?”

He shook his head a little, trying to clear his mind of the sappy emotions that were filling him from the inside out. “I gotta go fetch Jen, sweetheart,” he told her apologetically. “I’ll be back soon and we can finish the movie then, okay?”

Sophia’s forehead furrowed and she stepped into full view, her hands on her hips. “Like hell you are, Chris!” She pouted indignantly. “If Jen-ster’s in trouble, there is no way in hell you’re leaving me behind again!”

Amazement battled with love in Chris’ chest. Not only was his mate beautiful and kind and loving and sweet, but she also not only understood his profound bond with Jensen, but supported it. He could never have dreamed that his mate would’ve been so empathetic and accepting, and it did something to his insides that he didn’t have a name for, but he knew he wouldn’t admit.

He really had the best of both worlds.

“Oh, baby,” he nodded, trying to convey the gratitude and love through their mating bond. “Thank-you.”

“Don’t,” she cut him off with a smile. “He’s like a brother to me too, Chris. You and me are always gonna be there for him. He’s way more important to both of us, than some stupid movie.”

Chris was fairly certain he was the luckiest guy in the world.

At least, he thought he was, until he saw the scene in the park unfolding in front of his eyes.

He was right about one thing though.

The shit had really hit the fucking fan.

~*Jared*~

Jared grinned as his brother ranted about the evils of Dora the Explorer. He suspected that Jeff’s ardent hatred was largely due to the fact that the twins watched their cartoons almost constantly, and Jeff could never say no to either of them. He couldn’t blame his brother, though; the little ones had definitely inherited the puppy-dog eyes, as much as Jared was still the grand master of the expression.

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to talk to Val for me?” Jeff aimed a hopeful glance at him. “Convince her that Dora is gonna turn the twins’ brains to mush?”

Jared snorted. “They’re boys, Jeff,” he dismissed. “The Dora phase will be over in the next few
weeks, once they discover Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.”

“Now that was a good program,” Jeff grinned. “They need to be watching that.”

“I recall more than one occasion when you thought you were Donatello,” Jared teased.

“Says the guy who made us call him Raphael from ages four till six,” Jeff countered with a chuckle. Jared grinned, a slight blush creeping up his features that just made Jeff laugh harder.

A calm quiet descended over the brothers as they lapsed into their own thoughts. The future Alpha knew his older brother well enough, to know that there was something on his mind, but he was content to wait until the man felt comfortable enough to divulge his concerns.

He entertained himself with thoughts of his beautiful mate, wondering how Jensen was faring in his own agendas for the day. He could feel very faint anger over their mating bond, and it was safe to assume that Jen had fought with either his father or his brother; either way, Jared felt sympathetic, and made a mental note to pick up some of Jensen’s favorite red velvet cake on the way home.

“You’re planning on making Jensen your Beta?” the elder Padalecki suddenly blurted.

Jared blinked. He hadn’t given himself time to think about the implications of him becoming Alpha, but faced with it now, he figured that there wasn’t much to think about. “Of course,” he nodded, as though he’d known so all along. “Why?”

“The pack’s Beta is a big role to fill, Jared,” his brother told him solemnly, holding up a hand as soon as Jared bristled at the implication that Jensen couldn’t handle it. “I’m not saying he can’t,” Jeff clarified, pacifying the Alpha momentarily, “I’m merely asking whether he knows that he will have to.”

Jared paused. “We haven’t talked about it yet,” he admitted reluctantly. “He’s gonna be an amazing Beta though.” He raised his chin in defiance, challenging his brother to refute his claim.

“I’m not arguing,” Jeff replied blithely, not rising to the bait. “He’s already got most of the pack wrapped around his little human finger. And on that note,” Jeff shot him a significant look, leaning his elbows on his knees, “will he remain human or are you going to change him?”

The Alpha choked on what may or may not have been his own saliva. He couldn’t deny the fierce heat that claimed his body at the very thought of Jensen as a Were…but he had asked his beautiful mate to give up so much already. Could he really demand the man to give up, essentially, his species? Did he have any right at all to even ask?

“I’m sexy and I know it!”

Jared jumped with a decidedly unmanly squeak at the harsh ringing of his cellphone from his pocket. Annoying ringtone aside, he was insanely grateful to Chad for his awesome timing, that saved him from answering. “Hey, buddy! What’s…”

“Jay-rod,” Chad’s grim voice stopped Jared’s words in his throat. “We got a problem.”

~*Jensen*~
“Mr Padalecki.” Jensen tried to keep the sigh out of his voice as he turned around to face the irate Alpha. “To what do I owe the pleasure, Sir?”

Jensen cast a speculative glance over the older man, assessing the threat. He wondered what Jared’s father was doing, this far away from the packlands, but he didn’t have time to dwell on that.

“It’ll take a whole lot more than manners and charm to impress me, boy,” Gerald narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Sighing, Jensen began to lose his already faltering grip on patience. “I wasn’t aware I was trying to impress you, Sir,” he said drily, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “You’ll have to forgive me if I didn’t expect to be on evaluation today.”

*Great, Jen, fantastic,* he rebuked himself inwardly. *Doing a bang-up job making Jared’s life easier by totally not antagonizing his father.*

To his surprise, the senior Padalecki showed the barest lift of his upper lip. “The human has some claws after all,” he remarked evenly. “But then…you’re not like most humans, are you?”

Although it was phrased like a question, Jensen got the distinct impression that the Padalecki Alpha wasn’t really asking. All the same, he nodded slowly. “No.” He bit back his instinctively snarky comment. “I don’t suppose I am.”

“My eldest son informed me of your ancestry.” Gerald took a few cautious steps forward, leaning against the cement table across from him. “And about your rescuing escapades in that warehouse.”

Jensen remained stoically silent, wondering where the man was going with his line of thought. His expression gave nothing away, and although it would be safe to assume that he was going to thank Jensen for saving Jared’s life, he found himself unwilling to put anything past the Alpha. For all he knew, the senior Padalecki believed that Jared wouldn’t have been in danger to begin with, if he hadn’t have gotten himself captured. Or inserted himself into Jared’s life to begin with, both perfectly valid points.

Silence reigned between them for several moments, but before Gerald could break it, the sound of an engine cut through the otherwise still air.

Chris.

Momentary relief settled over him. Having his surrogate brother around might not ease the tension, but it would make him feel a whole lot better. He hated that he was effectively hiding behind Chris, but even he had to admit on a logical level that he wouldn’t stand a chance against a wolf, much less an Alpha.

That relief promptly disappeared when he saw Chris’ passenger.

All at once, the reaction of the other wolves at the house filled his mind, and he was in motion at the same time that Gerald Padalecki lifted his eyes to the approaching vehicle.

Jensen cursed when Chris parked off. He had hoped that Kane would have enough sense to hightail it away from Gerald, who was likely going to flip his lid about Sophia…but that would have meant leaving him to face the Alpha’s wrath, and Jensen knew that Chris couldn’t have done that.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to rip into him about it later.

He turned around to see Gerald taking determined strides towards them, his eyes blazing with temper
and directed at the former Morgan pack kin. Jensen pushed Sophia behind himself and Chris, while idly observing that in a cartoon, the elder Padalecki would have steam rising from his ears.

“What in the name of Mother Luna is this?!” he growled ferociously, and Jensen could swore he saw the man’s wolf in his shadow for a moment. He fought back the urge to flinch, bringing himself to his full height instead.

“Sir, I think you need to calm…”

“I was not talking to you, you pathetic little human!” Gerald spat, and Jensen might have been insulted if he weren’t so worried about the way Chris was bristling next to him. He touched his finger subtly to Kane’s wrist, warning him to keep his calm. “I demand to know what is going on at once!”

Jensen took a casual step forward, angling himself in front of Chris in such a way that the irate boy didn’t really register it. “I can explain everything, if you’d be so kind as to back up a few notches and let Chris get Soph home.”

“That bitch is Morgan blood!” Padalecki roared, and this time, Jensen had to physically restrain his best friend, holding out his arm in front of him. Sophia caught on to his intention and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind, which served Jensen well but only seemed to aggravate the Alpha.

Gerald clenched his fists tightly, turning around, and turning back, pacing in a tight circle, and Jensen kept his eye on him warily. He’d learned a long time ago, never to take visual off an unpredictable aggressor…

…which was why it was only on the fourth round of pacing that Jensen noticed Chad slipping determinedly into a park, obscured mostly by the tree but enough in Jensen’s line of sight to see him tapping his watch in an unspoken message.

Stall for time.

And that, Jensen knew, could only mean one thing.

His mate was coming.

The knowledge filled him with equal parts relief and concern. He longed for the strength Jared radiated, and the comfort that came just from knowing that he was near. On the other side of the coin, he hated for there to be even more tension between father and son, once again inadvertently caused by him. He had been mulling on the idea of trying to reach some sort of truce with Gerald Padalecki, if only because of Jared, but with this, Jensen doubted it would be possible.

“Sir, if you’d just…” he tried for a placatory voice.

“Don’t even,” Gerald warned, whirling around dangerously. Jensen held up his hands, palms up, the universal gesture for peace, even as he placed himself more prominently in front of Chris. Sophia kept him distracted somehow, Jensen realized, when Kane made no move to dislodge him.

Satisfied that Chris and Sophia were safely behind him, Jensen took a few tentative steps forward. “She’s not spying on us or anything, Sir,” he started softly, keeping his voice gentle and even in order to try to get through to the man. “You have my word. She’s left her pack for Chris, or she plans to, at least.”

“Plans to?” he asked sarcastically. “Is that going to happen before or after she reports to her devil
spawn about the chinks in our armor?” he eyed Jensen pointedly as he said those words.

Jensen felt the sting, although he tried not to show it outwardly. “She isn’t going to betray us. She isn’t going to betray him! She’s his…”

“Do not tell me that they are mates,” Gerald interrupted him again, eyes flashing dangerously in a way that really should have warned Jensen just how close to the edge the man was.

“They are,” he nodded heedlessly, ardent in his belief. “They’re mates.”

“What do you know of mating, you insignificant little infestation?!” he asked scathingly, taking a step closer to him. Jensen didn’t move back, his own anger rearing up in his body.

Green eyes alight with fury, he ignored his common sense in favor of his white hot temper. “I might not have grown up with the knowledge, but I know enough to acknowledge them when I see it!” he retorted heatedly. “I know enough to respect the sanctity of it, and I know enough to accept it. I know enough to say that it transcends packs, and genders, and ages, and even species! More than anything else, I know enough to know that I’m Jared’s and he’s mine, and just because you’re too God damned bigoted to look past it, doesn’t make it any less the truth!”

He didn’t see the man move. At least, not until one massive hand was hurtling towards his face.

He dimly remembered Aldis warning him while they trained him, never to let his temper precede his observation of the other person’s moves. That was always a sore spot for him.

The next thing he registered, was intense pain exploding across his face, Gerald’s backhand splitting his lip open, although it felt more like his entire face had been ripped in two.

He hurtled towards the ground, and his head connected with something hard, making agony erupt all over him once again.

Then, it was dark.

~*Jared*~

“What did you say Dad was doing today?” Jared asked his brother, fingers tapping anxiously against his jean-clad knee. He’d consented to his older brother’s driving, on account of the fact that he was too wound up to drive, but without the focus on the road, his mind was left vulnerable to all the thoughts of what could’ve been happening in that damn park.

Why? Why couldn’t Trouble just leave Jensen alone for a little while?

Jared remembered his blood freezing when Chad told him that his father had cornered Jensen in the park near school, after Jensen had had words with his brother. He made a mental note to ask his mate what had happened with Josh, but the more pressing matter, was why his father had cornered Jen.

Listening, for once, to his better judgement, he’d asked Chad not to make his presence known until Jared got there. He was worried that any antagonizing might set his temperamental father off, and that couldn’t work out well for any of them.

“He didn’t really mention it,” Jeff’s strained voice answered him. “Just said he was going out on
What the hell kind of pack business did he have at school?” Jared knew that his brother didn’t deserve his snappy tone, but there were precious few ways for him to vent his growing frustration.

Luckily, Jeff seemed to be in a particularly understanding mood. “I don’t know, man. I can’t think of anything. Beaver’s on the packlands today, and he was the only person Dad would have even considered coming out to meet.”

Biting back the comments that threatened to spill from his mouth—because Jeff was tolerant, but snarking at his driving tended to make the man real unfriendly, real fast—Jared huffed out a breath, scrubbing his face with his palms. He didn’t know what he was going to find when he got to that park…and by Mother Luna, he couldn’t help but feel like whatever it was, it wasn’t going to be good.

Jared had never wanted to be proven wrong more in his whole life.

Unfortunately, his instincts rarely were.

As they turned on to Singer Avenue, he was greeted by the sight of his mate, strategically positioned to protect Kane and Sophia, in such a way that he wondered whether Kane had even noticed. He felt his mate’s anger and frustration over their mating bond, but he also felt the tension and the fear and the indignation, all combined to make one hell of a volatile concoction.

He had no time to dwell on what his Jensen was feeling, however. Jared watched in abject desperation as whatever Jensen said caused a trigger reaction. His father backhanded his mate so hard that he heard the resounding clap from where he was, and he was frozen in horror as Jensen’s head snapped to the side so hard he had to wonder about the possibility of whiplash. Chris’ hand shot out, his fingers ghosting a second too late over Jensen’s arm, failing to catch him. Jared leapt out of the still-moving truck only to be treated to a dull, sickening thud as Jensen’s head bounced off the hard ground.

That sound, more than anything, spurred him into action.

“Jensen!” he bellowed, sprinting on what felt like mostly numb legs, over to his lover. He slid on his knees, stopping uncertainly at Jensen’s head. His lip was split and there was a cut, and a major bruise on his forehead. Contrary to the panic dominating his insides, his hands were gentle as he maneuvered Jensen’s head carefully into his lap. “Jen?” he tapped the side of his mate’s face ever so gently, mindful of the burgeoning red that was on his opposite cheek. “Baby, wake up. I need you to wake up for me.”

Jared registered Chris coming around him, lifting Jensen’s legs up. *Elevate the legs. Restores blood flow to the brain,* a voice in his mind supplied, sounding suspiciously like Jensen. Jen had given them all the basic first aid lecture—months on the streets had ingrained it into him—and Jared had once teased him for it.

Never again.

“Baby?” he tried again, leaning in close, hunched over Jensen’s face, and breathing the words into his ear. “Come on, Jen, you can’t do this to me, not again. You promised me not to do this anymore. You promised not to scare me like this. Normal, remember? We were going to try to be boring for a little while, no more trouble and pain and fear. You promised.” Jared was barely cognizant of the words streaming from his mouth, but he let them continue regardless. “Can’t go back on your word, baby. You need to come back to me, you need to let me see those beautiful green eyes. Come on,
baby, please.” He peppered feather-light kisses over skin that was hot to the touch.

“Jay.”

Jensen barely garbled the words, but it was still one of the most awesome things Jared had ever heard. He breathed a shaky sigh of relief that was equals parts a laugh and a sob.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m right here, love. Not going anywhere, I got you.” He shuffled a little, trying to prop Jensen up against his knees. A pained little sound came from the back of his throat, and Jared murmured a soft apology, settling into a position that had Jensen sitting up against his chest. “I got you.”

“Need to stand, Jay,” Jensen croaked out, after swallowing a few times. “I need… I think… I can’t…”

“Shh,” the future Alpha ghosted a finger along Jensen’s jaw, “I’m here. Just hold on to my shoulders and I’ll help you, okay?”

Jensen started to nod, but he stopped the action abruptly, another whimper escaping his lips. Jared’s heart hurt at the sound, but he focused on wrapping both arms around Jensen’s waist and gently lifting his mate into a standing position. He hadn’t realized until that moment, but Chad, Jeff, Chris and Sophia were all around them, giving Jensen space and air, but forming some sort of supportive shell, with the two of them at its epicenter.

As they stood, Chris immediately took hold of Jensen’s arm, helping to steady him. Slowly, the terror of seeing his mate hurt- again- drained from Jared’s body, leaving in its wake a searing and potent fury.

His limbs trembled with repressed rage, but he couldn’t allow his mate to get hurt. “Chad.” His gruff voice seemed to catch Jensen’s attention, who looked over at him. “I need you to take him.”

Having had Jared’s flank for as long as he did, Chad knew better than to question him. The blond took over from him, wrapping a protective arm around Jensen, and Jared kissed his lover’s forehead gently, away from the bruise, before rounding on his father.

“You.” The word was stated with a voice of steel. Red flickered along the edges of Jared’s vision as he started towards his father, the inner Alpha in him only seeing the threat to his Beta.


His wolf burst from his skin, indicative of his blinding rage. His father shifted in response, and Jared barely heard the yelp from his mate. Suddenly, Jeff was in front of him, standing between the warring Padaleckis.

“Jared, just calm down man,” Jeff mindspoke to him. “Don’t do this.”

“How could you?” he snarled instead, talking over Jeff to his father. “How dare you…”

“How dare I?” his dad blustered, pawing the ground angrily. “That human has been nothing but trouble from the outset for this family!”

“You’re the only one making trouble, Dad!” Jared tried to dart forward, but he found his way blocked by Jeff. Uncaring, he shouldered his brother out of the way, stronger with the force of his anger flowing through his veins.

His father glared at him, the aggression of their Alphas coming out in full force. “Bush is not one of
us! Who does he think he is, defending that courtship? He is no one!"

“He is mine!” Jared growled. The adrenaline pumping through him decided that enough words were
said; it was time for actions.

Unfortunately, Jensen didn’t agree.

Before he or his father could pounce, Jensen was next to him, on his knees, barely conscious and
clutching on to him, batting away anyone else who tried to extricate him from his hold on Jared’s fur.

“J’red,” Jensen breathed, pain clear in his voice. “Stop.”

Overriding all his other instincts, Jared’s protectiveness set in. The anger drained away, leaving only
the impulse: cuddle, protect, take care of mate.

“Both of you…” Jensen struggled back to a standing position, aided somewhat by Jared pushing his
muzzle up underneath Jensen. “Stop. Shift.”

Listen to mate. Make mate happy.

Without an argument, Jared shifted. Something hit his back, and he nodded his thanks at Chad when
he realized that it was his jeans. He pulled them on, seeing that the rips in the fabric didn’t reveal
anything raunchier than a little thigh.

When he straightened, his father had also shifted, and was pulling on his own, somewhat tidier
slacks. His narrow-eyed suspicion showed in his gaze, which was trained on him and Jensen, and
rather than focusing on the rage that was consuming him seconds ago, Jared concentrated on his
barely cognizant lover.

“Chad, call Beaver,” he instructed quietly. “Tell him to meet us at our place.”

“Jay,” Jensen took in a shuddery breath, closing his eyes against the pain. “Stop fighting. Enough.”
Jensen leaned against him heavily, but faced his father, and before Jared could stop him, Jensen was
addressing his father. “Sir…please reconsider. Chris has been nothing but loyal to your pack, even
even though he had no reason to be. Trust him, if not her. If not me. If not the mating. Don’t make Chris
lose his family for someone he loves. That’s a choice neither party really has to make.”

Jared knew that his mate was talking just as much about him, as he was about Chris. Whether his
father saw it or not, was no longer his concern. Jensen swayed in his arms for the third time in a few
minutes, and that? That was his concern.

“It’s over, baby, come on,” he murmured, starting to gently, slowly, lead Jensen towards his truck.
“We need to get that head checked out, I think you have a concussion.”

“M’kay,” his mate breathed, going almost lax against him. Jared caught him up against his body and
began walking them to the car, careful not to jar his precious cargo. “Chris…”

“He’s with Sophia, love,” Jared said quietly. He read the concern in the pain-filled, clouded green
eyes, and kissed the eyes closed. “He’s not going to do anything. I think he’ll just follow us, he’s
more worried about you.”

“M’fine,” Jensen pouted adorably, starting to space out a little in a way that Jared wasn’t entirely
comfortable with. From his admittedly limited experience, he knew that a dazed and confused
concussion patient likely needed quick medical attention.
“I know you are, baby,” Jared humored his mate, before turning to his brother. Jeff had followed them wordlessly, swinging the keys absently in his hand while casting concerned glances at Jensen. “I’m sorry for pushing you.”

“I would have done the same if it were Val,” Jeff shrugged it off, quirking his lips in his forgiveness. “I’ll drive.”

Jared nodded grimly, tightening his arms around Jensen. “Step on it.”

~*Jensen*~

Jesus, it felt like a marching band was given carpe diem on his cranial cavity.

Jensen groaned at the dull throbbing in his face. His skin felt raw and hot, and the tear on his lip felt like it was being stretched both ways, and all that was excluding the hangover-from-Hell headache he was courting. It took him longer than he would be comfortable to admit, but he finally managed to recall what had happened.

With the painful flashes of memory came the knee-jerk concern for his Alpha.

“Jay?” he croaked, forcing his eyes to open and squinting against the sudden influx of light. Even the slight movement caused by talking, sent shooting pains that seemed to go directly to his brain, as though stabbing it with a hot poker. Abruptly, the lights were dimmed to almost dark, and a large, warm hand trailed gentle fingers up his jaw line. He leaned into the familiar touch, releasing the muscles he wasn’t aware he’d tensed, and against his best efforts, a small mewl of pain sounded at the back of his throat.

“Right here, baby,” Jared whispered into his ear, making him aware that Jared was stretched out beside him, as close to spooning as he could get without full-body contact. He wrestled his way out of the bubble of pain he was encumbered in, forcing himself to turn slightly and face the concern Jared was projecting. He pushed aside his burning need for some answers, trying to offer comfort first instead. Reaching up and doing his best to ignore the pain that accompanied every action, he brushed his knuckles across Jared’s cheek.

The Alpha leaned into his touch, the same way Jensen had done just moments ago, and it was a testament to how well Jared knew him, that he began explaining almost immediately.

“We left the park and brought you home. Beaver agreed to meet us here so that he could see to you.”

Jensen nodded slowly. He vaguely remembered riding in Jared’s truck, cradled in his Alpha’s embrace. He remembered soothing words and gentle caresses, and focusing on Jared’s baritone voice to keep from passing out. He had been in and out of awareness, but he’d had enough concussions in his life to know that he absolutely had to stay conscious. After he was sure that Chris and Jared weren’t going to keep fighting with Gerald, he had relaxed, hanging on to Jared’s voice like a lifeline and hoping that the future Alpha wasn’t upset with him.

“Beaver diagnosed a major concussion,” Jared continued, his voice strained, “possibly a hairline fracture to your skull. Severe bruising to your face. And you dislocated your jaw.”

That would explain why he couldn’t really talk.
Jared nuzzled his neck, his hand drifting down to rub against Jensen’s ribs. “Jim still has some of that serum he made. The one that extracts the healing properties in my blood?” Jensen nodded slightly to show he remembered what Jared had explained to him after he’d woken up from his five-day coma. “He’s bringing it over. He should be here in a few. There won’t be pain much longer, love.”

He wondered to himself, whether Jim had mentioned to Jared that he would have to re-set Jensen’s jaw before injecting the serum. Jared’s nerves were already so frayed, that Jensen somewhat doubted it. He sighed inwardly; pushing his jaw back into place would be excruciating, but at least he’d get the best pain meds around thereafter.

Jensen laid pliant in Jared’s arms. He could hear sounds in the living room, and from the voices he could pick out, Chad, Chris, Sophia and Jeff were still there, probably waiting for him to feel better. With a wince, he realized that now would be the best time to talk to Jared- as painful as that would be on his jaw- without anyone listening in.

He turned to look at the handsome planes of his lover’s face. There was something in the Alpha’s expression. Something that Jensen knew well enough to read as important. He wondered what Jared wasn’t telling him… but decided that he would ask after some of the torture had left those stunning, slanted hazel eyes.

Steeling himself against the pain, he forced the words through his stiff and aching mouth. “You ‘kay?”

“Not supposed to be talking, baby!” Jared chided him immediately, worried hazel eyes snapping open wide to look at him. “You’re going to hurt yourself even more…”

A frown marred his smooth face and a hand crept up Jared’s chest to rest against his cheek. “You ‘kay?” he repeated insistently, repressing his groan at the pain.

The future pack Alpha’s mouth opened again, looking ready for another reprimand, before all the fight abruptly deflated from his body. His bottom lip quivered once, twice, before Jared shifted on to his back and lifted one muscular arm to throw across his eyes. Jensen situated himself slowly across Jared’s chest and pulled at his wrist, urging him gently not to hide.

“He hurt you, Jen,” Jared’s broken whisper hurt his heart. “I can’t believe he put his hands on you.”

Jensen batted at his lover’s arm until the slanted, glistening eyes were trained on him. “Not ‘is fault,” he managed to utter. “Pr’voked ‘im.”

“Baby, Chad was there,” Jared huffed. “How is telling my father the extent to which you believe in our matings, provoking him?”

“Rude.”

“Oh, yeah, and I’m sure he was Mr. Southern Charm,” Jared returned sardonically. Like he was handling fragile china, Jared turned them over, hovering over Jensen’s body, balancing his weight on his elbows on either side of Jen’s body. As the Alpha looked over at him again, some of his features softened. “Chad told me what else you said. That you told your brother not to mess with the pack. That we’re your family.” His eyes softened even more, and his voice came out husky and emotional. “That it was never a choice between him and me, because it was always me.”

Sweat was beading at the back of his neck with the pain that speaking was causing him. All he could manage, was a weak, “F’r’ev’r, Jay.”

It was enough, it seemed.
Jared leaned down, nuzzled his face with more tenderness than was strictly necessary, and brushed his lips against Jensen’s pulse point. Jensen bared his throat submissively, a deeper part of him noticing the Alpha’s need to reaffirm as much as comfort. Jared growled lightly against his skin, proving Jensen’s instinct spot-on.

“Mine,” he proclaimed, nibbling and sucking a path along Jensen’s collar. Jared continued his torturously exquisite trail until he reached Jen’s heart, turning his head and resting his ear over the beating muscle. “All mine.”

Love and lust clouded his mind, a welcome distraction from the throbbing pain. Jensen reached up to tangle his hand in his lover’s brown locks, shifting himself closer to the warmth that the Alpha seemed to always exude. “Always.”

~*Jared*~

“I’m feeling better already, Jay. Will you stop growling at Mr. Beaver?”

Ignoring his mate, Jared continued to scowl at the Padalecki pack’s healer. “You should have told me you were going to have to re-set his jaw.” Jensen’s scream of pain would play on replay in his nightmares, that was for damn sure.

Jim was ignoring his reprimand just as much as he was ignoring Jensen’s. “What difference would it have made, ya idjit? I had to do it, whatever happened. It was just a matter of how much we were all gonna agonize over it.”

Jared grumbled incoherently under his breath, seeing the reason in the older alpha’s logic but not wanting to relinquish his irritation. Jim didn’t bat an eyelid; he simply finished packing up his bag and checked once more on Jen’s healed jaw and the bruises on his face that already looked a few days old. The bruises on the side of his body, from the fall, had all but disappeared, but it was still a consolation prize when Jared saw the bruise impressions that would be on Jensen’s face for at least another two hours.

Apparently, healing was quicker to happen than the evidence of abuse leaving the body.

His mate reached over and took his hand, squeezing it comfortably as he sensed the turmoil roiling inside him. Jared never ceased to be amazed at the power his mate held over him; just the simple touch from Jensen brought calm to his heart, made him clear-headed for the first time since Chad phoned him.

“Allright kid, you’re good to go,” Jim announced to Jensen, and Jared was glad to see that the beautiful green eyes were now clear and warm.

“Thanks, Sir,” Jensen grinned, and Jared couldn’t help being amused. It often slipped his mind, that Jim was also his Chem professor, and it made Jen flinch whenever he would call the teacher by name.

Jim shook his head. “Yeah, sure,” he said gruffly, hiding the smile that Jensen always seemed to bring out in the older man. “I’m glad you’re okay, Kid. I’ll see you in the lab on Monday, I guess?”

“Yes, Sir,” Jensen nodded as they walked Jim out. “There are a couple new theories I have to test out.”
Beaver turned around at the threshold, sending Jensen a quizzical look. “Are you ever going to tell me what you’re trying to do, Ackles?”

Glancing over at his mate in surprise, Jared found him grinning mysteriously. “Maybe one day,” came the sly answer.

Jared made a note to ask Jensen what he was doing- it made him curious to know that Jim didn’t even have a clue. Jensen and Beaver geeked out over Chemistry more times than Jared had paid attention, and it must have been something big if Jen hadn’t even mentioned it to the man before.

In the living room, he forced himself to let Jensen out of his arms. Chris, Chad, Sophia and Jeff all wanted their turns checking on his mate, and he had had his time alone with Jen; not that it had been enough, or would ever be, but that was not the point.

After all the hugs and the varying degrees of threats towards Jensen (Chris and his “If you ever put yourself in front of me again, I’ll kick your ass myself” being the most threatening of them) Jared knew it was time to bring his mate up to speed on what they had discussed during Jensen’s brief stint in unconsciousness. The only problem would be bringing up the topic…

Before he could say anything, shrewd green eyes became trained on him. “You’re going to tell me whatever it was that you’ve been hiding since I woke up fully, aren’t you?”

Jared blinked twice. Then again, he thought idly to himself, that might not really be much of a problem.

“You sure your Shamanic history thing hasn’t given you freaky mind reading abilities, Jense?” Jeff asked seriously, and Jared had to laugh at the surprise his older brother was showing. He loved showing off how in-sync he was with his Jensen.

Jensen seemed to be no exception. “Nope.” He popped the ‘p’ with a smug smirk on his face. “I just know my mate that well.”

Whether he knew it or not, that was the first time Jensen had vocally acknowledged Jared as his mate, in front of him.

It took the Alpha a hell of a lot to remember that now was the time to be talking, and not almost becoming an exhibitionist with his sexy mate.

“Baby.” At the muted address, Jensen turned to face him, emerald eyes concerned. “My dad should never have laid a hand on you.”

Jensen’s face softened. “Jay, I…”

“My brother’s right.” His defense came from Jeff. “He had no right to do what he did to the Kanes, he had no right to display open hostility to Sophia without even considering her fairly, he had no right to estrange mine, Chris’ and Jared’s mates from the pack, and above all, he had no right to lash out and hurt you.”

The green-eyed man was quiet. Jared could feel the empathy across their mating bond; knew that Jensen was trying to justify his dad’s actions in an effort to preserve Jared’s childhood hero; and he loved him all the more for it. But if the afternoon had taught him anything, it was that he couldn’t live his life with his predecessor and father constantly disapproving and undermining his mate and Beta.

He loved the man, and he always would, but like Jensen had shown with Josh, the bond between them went further than any other bond. There was nothing in the world he would put in front of Jensen; not his family, not the pack, not even himself.
Knowing Jensen would hear what he was trying to say, he aimed his softly spoken words at him. “Never a choice, baby. It was always you and me.”

Sure enough, comprehension quickly fell over Jensen’s face, but the warmth and love was quickly replaced by sadness and pain. “No Jay,” he shook his head vehemently. “Whatever it is you’re thinking of doing, no.”

“Just hear us out, Jen, please,” Chris entreated quietly. The self-reproach from letting Jensen get hurt for him still hadn’t abated, leaving the alpha’s blue eyes torn and tired. Jared knew that was the only thing that kept Jensen quiet, and he immediately felt like a bastard for exploiting both Kane’s pain and his mate’s compassion.

More important, however, was getting Jensen to agree to their suggestion.

“Jared doesn’t want to bring the pack into this,” Chad picked up where he left off as Jared gathered Jensen in his arms, bringing him against his chest. “They’d probably be on his side, but he doesn’t want to make them choose. We’re pretty sure you won’t let him challenge his father either.”

“Damn straight,” Jensen nodded strongly, his hands briefly tightening on Jared’s forearms. The Alpha thought it was a good thing that those hands weren’t pushing him away. “So what do you guys propose we do?”

This sell, would be the difficult part. Jensen turned to him, seemingly knowing without asking that Jared would be the one to tell him their idea. He took a deep breath; it would be best to just rip the proverbial band aid off.

“We leave. Start a pack, all our own.”

~*Jensen*~

Blinking owlishly, Jensen focused on his Alpha. “You’re joking, right, Jay?” he asked quietly, with a sense of foreboding in him that told him Jared was nothing but serious. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

Jared was unwavering. “I’m not kidding.”

Jensen nodded decisively. “In that case, no. It’s not happening.” Before he was surrounded by an uproar, Jensen held up his hands diplomatically. “Let’s start on one side of the room,” he suggested, his voice only slightly tainted with sarcasm, “so that I can listen to y’all tell me how y’all were driven crazy in the space of an afternoon, in an orderly fashion.” Stepping out of Jared’s arms, he held on to his lover’s hand to show him that there were no bad feelings. “Jeff?”

“It’s the only logical step,” Jared’s brother stated. In any other scenario, Jensen might have been amused at their obedience towards him. “I thought a compromise could have been worked out, but even I have to admit defeat here.”

Nodding slowly as he considered Jeff’s words, Jensen flicked his eyes towards Chris. His blue-eyed brother snorted mirthlessly, a bitter sound that he never wanted to hear again. Before he could prompt him, Chris offered: “The man disapproves of my mate and my brother. I think that’s enough of an explanation, Jen.”

Wincing, he nodded. He could understand Sophia and Chris’ reasoning, and he nodded at both of
them to show that, but he couldn’t understand why everyone else was acting as irrationally as they were.

“We can’t just abandon ship,” he argued, aiming his words at Jared. “I won’t let you do this, I won’t make you choose between your family and me.”

Even as he said the words, the inklings of something sprouted into his mind. It danced elusively on the edges of his comprehension, teasing him, and he shook his head in an attempt to clear his mind enough to focus.

“You’re not doing anything, baby,” his lover returned calmly. “My father forced my hand. He knows the strength of our bond, and still, he pushed me. He went too damn far today.” The beginnings of the infamous Padalecki temper started to show and Jensen fit himself in the curve of Jared’s body, a preventative motion that calmed Jared down before he could get agitated. “Too far,” Jared grumbled again, nuzzling his neck.

Jensen hummed distractedly, his mind still consumed by the overwhelming thought that he was missing something very obvious. Facts drifted through his awareness, almost forming a full picture, but coming just short every time, like a frustrating jigsaw puzzle. He was vaguely cognizant of the stares he was receiving, and of Jared’s hand gripping insistently at his hip, but he knew that if he broke his concentration for even a second, the fleeting revelation would be gone.

After several minutes, he finally looked up into concerned hazel eyes. “Something’s missing,” he whispered in frustration, ignoring the inquisitive quirk of Jared’s eyebrow. “What am I missing?”

The light tapping at their door didn’t much pull Jensen out of his reverie, but when he saw their guest, he was surprised enough to snap back to reality.

“Megan?”

Jared took a tentative step towards his sister, and Meg threw herself into her brother’s arms. Small sobs shook the noticeably smaller frame and Jensen racked his brain for something—anything—that would calm her down. He hated seeing the girl upset; Jared’s sister aside, she was a genuinely loving and sweet girl, not unlike her brother, and he had come to see her as his own little sister too.

As her arms erupted in goose bumps, Jensen was there with his jacket, draping it around her shoulders and trying to be as unobtrusive as possible to keep from disturbing her moment with Jared. The action was as unwarranted as it was unsuccessful, because in the next minute, he had an armful of angsting teenager.

“Shh, shh…hey, it’s gonna be okay, Meg. You’ll see. Hush.” He rubbed her back soothingly, feeling out of his depth, but not having the heart to turn her away. Wrapped up in his attempts at comfort, he completely missed Jeff’s fond smile and Jared’s proud and loving gaze. “We’re here, Meg, we’ve got you. We’ll make it okay.”

“I want to c-come with y’all,” the smaller girl hiccupped, tightening her grip around Jensen’s stomach. “Please let me come with, I’m sorry my dad hurt you, but please don’t leave me behind.”

“I want to c-come with y’all,” she answered miserably. “I want to go with y’all.” She turned to Jared and Jeff, without leaving the safety of Jensen’s arms. “I don’t want to lose y’all.”

“Meggy,” Jared began to shake his head, his eyes ravaged with pain and hurt. “I can’t just…”
“No!” The vehement girl pushed away and led the way to the door, flinging it open. “We’ve all made the same choice,” she gestured outside. “We don’t want to stay in the pack without you.”

Exchanging puzzled glances, they trooped outside, and Jensen’s jaw dropped when he saw their yard full of pack members, all looking to Jared as their future Alpha. The expression on his lover’s face was a mix of awe and shock, and Jensen was filled with pride at how many people were willing to follow Jared, even if it was away from…

…home.

Jensen stopped in his tracks. All at once, that last, stubborn puzzle piece slotted seamlessly into place in his mind, and a soundless gasp left his lips.

He figured it out.

His knees buckled and he landed bonelessly on the love seat on their porch.

This was bad.

###

Chapter End Notes

What did Jen figure out?

Hope y'all enjoyed! Happy Anniversary again! Lol! Much love!
The Traitor

Chapter Notes

You guys are awesome and I love y'all!!! On that note, I really hope that my big reveal doesn't disappoint anyone!! And I doubly hope that no one hates the way I handled Gerald!

Extra long chapter to make up for my absence!

Enjoy!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

His amazement at the pack’s dedication to him, was quickly extinguished by foreboding when he watched his mate drop unceremoniously on to their porch seat.

He took in Jensen’s ashen face, his rapid breathing and tight clench of his jaw; the pack became a forgotten entity at the back of his mind, and he dropped to his knees next to his stunned lover.

“Jen? Baby, what is it?”

Wide, frenzied green eyes snapped up, an aghast expression taking over Jen’s face. “I can’t believe I didn’t see this before,” Jensen whispered, agonized, before shooting up. “I’m a fucking moron! We need to get to the packlands, Jay. We need to go right now!”

Jensen was already moving towards Jared’s truck by the time the Alpha had gathered enough wit to comprehend what was going on. “Why do we…”

“There’s no time left, Jay!” Jensen stressed, agitation and fear pouring off him in waves. Turning to the pack, he raised his chin in order to project his voice. “Everyone needs to follow Jared and I to the packlands. This is no ruse, and I assure you that your future Alpha and I will not be turning this into a civil pack war. But right now, I need y’all to follow us.” As he said those last words, his gaze fell upon Jared’s. His big green eyes were beseeching, and Jared wondered why his mate thought he even had to ask; Jared would follow him anywhere, trust him with anything.

Before he could voice that sentiment, an alpha from his pack stepped forward. “We will follow our Beta with honor,” he announced, bowing his head towards Jensen in a submissive gesture.

Jared didn’t know whether his pride or Jensen’s shock was stronger at that statement.

His mate recovered faster than him, regardless, issuing his orders even as Jared’s Alpha was still busy posturing.

“Mothers and kids under 16 stay here,” he ordered authoritatively, pointedly ignoring Jared’s smug exterior. “To those coming with us, no action should be taken without express directives given by either Jared or me.”
Forcing his Alpha back into his control, Jared jumped into his truck, opening the door for his mate. “You think there’s trouble?” he asked grimly, feeling the anxiety pouring off Jensen.

His lover seemed to be in his own world. “There’s something missing,” he repeated his words from earlier, in the same tone of frustration. “What am I missing, Jay, what can’t I see?”

Jared knew intuitively that his mate wasn’t expecting an answer. Jensen was excellent at seeing patterns and making connections- he had seen that himself when he witnessed JR in action- and he had the feeling that the hardass gang member was making a comeback tonight.

His suspicions were confirmed when Jensen unconsciously ghosted his hand over his ankle, where he normally kept a knife.

Worry mounting, Jared sped up, taking a sliver of comfort from the feel of his packmates running in the woods that bracketed the road. A quick glance told him that Jensen was still trying to fit things together in his mind, his mate mouthing facts soundlessly as his fingers beat a staccato rhythm against his thigh. Unable to resist, Jared grabbed on to his hand.

Jensen started, green eyes snapping over to meet his. Whatever his mate saw in his gaze, softened the agitated planes of his face, and Jen squeezed his hand in reassurance.

“It’ll be okay, Jay,” he murmured. “I promise, we’re gonna be okay.”

Jesus, Jared hadn’t realized how much he needed to hear his mate say that. The tension that hadn’t left him since Jensen had taken that backhand, slowly melted away, and his fear receded until, by the time they reached his house, only determination was left in its wake.

The sprawling lands were bare as they pulled into the driveway. The wolves surrounded them for a moment, before turning back into their human forms, each one of them aiming confused glances at Jensen and Jared.

Uncertainty clenched a tight fist in his chest. “Jen?” he murmured. “What’s the matter? What’s going on?”

Before Jensen could answer, Gerald Padalecki was coming outside, an unfamiliar look on his face. Agitation and an interesting mix of other emotions clung to the older Alpha, but seeing that his gait was targeted specifically at Jensen was enough of a motivation for Jared to move protectively to stand in front of his mate. A livid challenge glinted in his eyes, and it wasn’t until Jensen tugged his arm, that Jared broke his visual of his father.

“Jay, not now. We have company.”

For some reason, Jared knew his mate didn’t mean their pack members.

He turned around to see nothing short of a Were army facing them, all looking ready for war. Instantly, he shifted, sensing his packmates do the same, and in the next moment, his father was next to him too. Jared didn’t move from his position next to Jensen, and was glad when Chris flanked his mate’s other side, Chad coming to flank his.

*It was pack war.*

~*Jensen*~
He had so hoped to be wrong.

Jensen knew he didn’t have the whole story, wasn’t really even sure who he should be accusing, but he was going to have to wing this one, since he could feel Jared’s residual confusion. Calling upon every last JR reserve in his arsenal, he straightened his back, facing what he assumed was the Morgan pack with an air of aloof that could only be managed from years of practice.

“Do y’all want to shift back?” he tossed out casually, crossing his arms over his chest. “Or would it be less embarrassing to have your plans fall apart in wolf form?”

The biggest wolf, with black fur and flinty brown eyes, snarled menacingly at him. Jensen didn’t so much as flinch, knowing all too well the dangers of showing weakness in front of the enemy, and after a full minute, he shifted.

A man with a salt-and-pepper beard took his place. He was handsome, in a rugged sort of way, but the sneer twisting his face was downright malignant. His boxer-clad body was decorated with scars and if Jen had to take a wild guess, it would have been that he was face-to-face with the infamous JD Morgan.

Like a chain reaction, the Morgan pack shifted, and Jensen noted the familiar faces of Jake, Sebastian and Mark. Pointedly ignoring Jake’s leer, Jensen found Jared’s eyes, nodding slightly to give him the go-ahead to shift, too.

He returned his gaze to JD Morgan, unwilling to let the man out of his sight until the pack had shifted completely. Morgan’s eyes were mocking, but JR was in the streets long enough to read the tension and the anger that laid beneath his cool façade.

It was time for JR to get him to crack, and if there was anything Jensen remembered and was great at, it was that.

He took a short step forward, all but ignoring Gerald’s eyes on him or Jared’s presence at his side. “Didn’t expect this, did you?” he asked airily, waving in the general direction of the pack behind him with unflappable calm. It was with a grim sort of satisfaction that he noted a muscle in Morgan’s jaw twitch…he had hit a nerve, and that only fueled his conviction.

“So you’re the human whore that has the Padaleckis all twisted into a pretzel?” Morgan returned, regaining his composure slightly and aiming a sleazy smile at him. Jensen recognized the diversionary tactic, scoffed at how see-through the ploy was.

He adopted a cocky smirk. “Jesus, the way they talk about you, I didn’t expect you to be stuck in amateur hour,” he drawled lazily, cocking his head to the side. At the same time, he sent out calming feelings to his mate over their bond. He might have seen through JD’s poor attempt to ruffle his feathers, but he didn’t think Jared did. “I mean, human whore? Really? That just seems a bit weak, is all.”

The JR part of him grinned as Morgan’s eyes narrowed. He obviously hadn’t expected Jensen to bite back, and not for the first time, he was glad that his opponent had underestimated him.

“Talking about weak,” his smirk widened, “let’s all take a moment to mourn the loss of that half-assed play you thought you’d run,” Jensen shook his head, clicking his tongue in mock sympathy.

That proved to be JD’s trigger. “You don’t know anything!” he snarled, taking an aggressive step forward. Jared responded in kind, pulling Jensen behind him, and he was quick to put his hands on
the young Alpha’s hips.

“He’s baiting you,” Jensen breathed into Jared’s neck, so low that even Wolf hearing wouldn’t pick it up. His lover’s muscles thrummed beneath his hands as Jared undoubtedly fought against his protective urges. “Just relax, Jay.”

He could feel how much it took for Jared to let him stand next to him, and he appreciated the show of faith. Channeling JR once more, he pinned Morgan with a laser glare.

“So, JD,” he carried on conversationally, as though nothing had occurred, “through no fault of my own, I’m pretty much a magnet for disaster. My luck is really quite infamous, and while I’m not particularly proud of how much trouble I can get into in any one space of time, it’s actually given me a fairly good landmark for when things are just too fishy.”

Jensen paused, both for effect, and to give him a moment to read all the faces that were in front of him. He scanned them with JR’s trained eyes, and when he caught the otherwise imperceptible flinch, he allowed a triumphant smirk to grace his features.

“You were a bit too quick on the draw, Jake.”

~*Jared*~

Jared’s head jerked to his mate’s. What did Abel have to do with anything? He could read the concentration that his mate was masking, and he resisted the urge to interrupt his flow, knowing that he would get his answers soon enough.

“What are you talking about, Ackles?” This time, it was Jake that took a step towards them, and Jared thought he deserved some kind of a fucking medal for not letting his Alpha take over and rip both father and son apart for so much as looking at his Jensen.

“Like I said,” he focused on his mate’s calculating face, “I’m a pretty unlucky guy. When I found out that mine and Jared’s secret had been compromised, we all assumed that we had a traitor within the pack. I figured Lady Luck had screwed me over again. But my brother…he kept mentioning this friend of his, who gave him all the information he had.”

Slowly, the picture was being formed in Jared’s mind.

“I let my temper get the better of me, and I told him to leave. I told my own brother that he didn’t have a chance if the choice was between him and Jared. And then Mr. Padalecki just happened to show up exactly where I was…now, that was when my radar went off.”

Jared took a moment to marvel at how Jensen had managed to use his own misfortune to his benefit, before he focused on his mate again.

“I was unlucky as all hell…but there was no way that the universe hated me that much. I wondered what the Padalecki pack’s Alpha was doing so far from home, but the more pressing issue, was that he had heard my conversation with my brother. And that was almost the nail in your coffin, wasn’t it Jake?” Jensen fixed Abel with a shrewd look, seeming to have forgotten his captivated audience.

“You thought Mr. Padalecki would hear me being disloyal to the pack. But you, not unlike him, underestimated the mating bond between Jared and me.”
Jared thought he couldn’t well be blamed for his further display of posturing, even in the face of a possible outbreak of pack war.

“You phoned him that day, made up some nonsense story about why he needed to go to the park. Josh must have told you beforehand where we were going to be, seeing as how you two got to be so chummy. My brother isn’t the best judge of character, but bringing him into this was a dirty move, Abel.”

Jared caught the flutterings of Jensen’s temper, beginning to show through his iron composure, and it was fascinating to watch as his mate gradually eased back into calm. It was foreign for him, seeing Jen as JR over here, but he couldn’t deny how incredible it was to watch him systematically tear the Morgan pack down.

“That aside,” Jen foraged on, “you used, what, a burner phone?” He stopped to roll his eyes. “Whatever it was, you told him…let me guess. That you had information about his son’s mate? That you had the proof he needed, that I wasn’t what everyone else thought I was?”

“That’s almost exactly right.” Jared was surprised his father’s voice piped up from behind him. There was no denying the mystification in the elder Alpha’s voice, and pride burst through Jared as his father finally acknowledged the brilliance that was his mate.

If Jensen was surprised at the unlikely source of backup, he showed no outward reaction. Honestly, Jared expected nothing less, since it looked like his mate was still juggling several things in his head.

“It was just your luck,” Jensen continued, unfazed, “and just mine, too, that Chris happened upon us. Before any issues could be resolved, a whole different one was brought to the plate. Tempers raged, and you got exactly what you wanted; an incident that would isolate the Padalecki Pack Alpha and his heir.”

Jared wondered idly whether Jensen had purposefully lumped himself in with the pack. Whether he had done it subconsciously or not, it seemed to have the devastating blow he was looking for, with the Morgan pack taking a few uncertain steps back, unease on the face of every last one of them. He tried not to think about the devastation that could have been wrecked if Jensen wasn’t as sharp as he was, wasn’t so stubborn about not making him choose between him and the pack. His parents, his home, the rest of their pack…everything could have been destroyed, if Jensen had only agreed to leave with him.

He had to fight down nausea, and the almost crippling relief that his mate was so perceptive and amazing.

JD took another step forward, and a warning growl was ripped from his teeth as his Alpha moved to the forefront of his mind, every protective instinct on high alert. It didn’t surprise him when Chris and Chad inched forward too, but it nearly floored him when his father stepped in front of them all.
“That’s enough, Morgan.” His voice cracked as sharp as a whip, the Alpha timbre in it stronger than Jared had heard in a long while. “Jensen makes some very interesting points. What do you have to say about them?”

Jared was beginning to get whiplash from the 180-turnarounds in his emotions. Hesitant hope took residence in his chest, tucked away for later behind his worry and agitation. This was the first time his father had spoken his mate’s name.

It’ll be okay, Jay. I promise we’ll be okay.

The words his mate had spoken to him, once a comfort, now also seemed like a possibility.

Forcing his attention back to the situation at hand, he tensed his muscles, awaiting Morgan’s answer. He absorbed the calming energy his mate was sending to him, trying to send back some warmth and love in the hopes that it would permeate his JR shell.

“I think we have a misunderstanding here,” Morgan finally spoke, his voice saccharine and sleazy all at once. “I was as aghast as you are, to find out what my son was trying to do…adolescent dreams of grandeur, you see.”

Jared thought that he really shouldn’t have been surprised at JD throwing his son under the bus, yet the thrum of shock and pity still washed over him. By the intermittent clenching of his jaw, Abel seemed to be feeling the betrayal too.

“Hiding behind your son?”

Jared knew that tone all too well…Jensen was goading Morgan. But why?

“I gotta say, that isn’t really inspiring coming from someone who’s supposed to be a big strong Alpha leader,” his mate drawled. To anyone else, it may have sounded like a taunt, but Jared could hear the undercurrent of consideration Jensen was taking with his words. He could see the calculating look in those green eyes he loved so much, and he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that Jen was looking for something more.

But what?

~*Jensen*~

He could feel Jared’s curiosity and confusion over their bond. Honestly, he wasn’t even sure what was prompting him to bait Morgan; it was an instinct that he had listened to, a JR instinct that he was so conditioned to acting on, that it hadn’t even occurred to him to leave well enough alone.

Something was...off. Something about JD Morgan screamed wrong to him. Granted, he had come to the packlands upon the realization that the traitor wasn’t Sandy, like he had initially suspected, but rather someone in the Morgan pack who had counted on creating tension, and then striking the pack at a weak point. He hadn’t known it was Jake, at the time, but the young wolf’s reaction when Jensen had begun talking about it had rightfully steered him to Abel.

All that aside, he was still getting a funkier vibe from Morgan, which was saying a whole hell of a lot.
The way the man had shamelessly sold out his flesh and blood struck a chord deep within him. Personal feelings aside, he had picked up on the manipulative nature of the Morgan pack Alpha, and years of experience told him that finding a single guilty party, didn’t necessarily mean that they’d gotten the most treacherous predator of them all.

Something told him that there was a lot more to JD Morgan than anyone really knew. And he wanted to find out what it was before it came back to bite them in the ass.

However, it seemed that the Alpha was no longer willing to indulge in their mind games, unsurprising, given how quickly he’d lost the first round.

“I won’t disturb you all with my pack’s politics,” Morgan answered smoothly. “I am simply here with my pack to offer my apologies for my son’s actions. I hope this will not impact our treaty agreement? I’m sure my dearly departed brother would just hate for that to happen.”

His JR senses spiked viciously once more at the way JD had sneered at the mention of his late brother. He made a mental note to ask Jared about that, all while keeping his eyes trained on Morgan and Jake.

“Leave, Morgan,” Gerald Padalecki growled. “And see to it that you stay off my packlands.”

Jensen could feel the disapproval rolling off his mate in waves, knew that Jared hadn’t liked the way his father had handled the situation, but objectively? Jensen was forced to agree with Mr. Padalecki. Had he been in the same scenario, when he was rolling with Aldis and Matt and the gang, he probably would have made the same call.

Anything to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

If he were being optimistic, he would hope that Morgan had just been scared into staying within the lines for the rest of his life.

Being the realist that he was, he knew that this was hardly the end.

Everything was still as the Morgan pack cleared out, a distinct air of relief amongst the pack members. They broke out in murmurs between themselves, but Jensen, Jared, Chris, Chad, Jeff and Gerald all remained on the front line, tensed and on their toes, up until the moment that the last glimpse of the rival pack was gone.

The minute they were, Jensen felt his lover’s arms wrap tightly around his waist from behind. He sagged against Jared’s muscled body, letting out all the tension coiled inside him with a drawn out, shaky exhale as he turned around to bury his face in Jared’s chest.

“It’s alright, Jen, it’s okay,” Jared breathed into his ear, and he realized belatedly that he was trembling with the adrenaline crash. “I’ve got you, baby…we did it. It’s over, we’re all safe.” Jared kept up a mindless litany of reassurances as he stroked Jensen’s back in soothing circles, patiently waiting for him to regain composure.

It hit him again, suddenly, how close they had all come to an all-out war. How close they’d come to a bloodbath. How close he had come to having to watch Jared fight for his home and his family, and get hurt while doing so…and it was that last burst of clarity that made him dizzy, knocking the air out of his lungs and making him unsteady on his feet.

Sensing his crash, Jared started gently herding him towards what he was cognizant enough to realize was the direction of his boyfriend’s childhood home. Another pair of gentle hands grasped on to his hand and arm, and the soft tones of Jared’s mom penetrated his fog of awareness.
“Get him inside and on the couch, Jare,” she was saying softly. “I’ll send Jeff to get the rest of the pack, and be back in a minute with some water for him.”

He allowed his boyfriend to all but carry him into the house, sparing a moment to feel grateful when Jared dropped on to the couch next to him instead of leaving him.

“Hush, baby,” Jared whispered, as though he could read Jensen’s thoughts, “I’m not going anywhere. You can lean on me.”

He hadn’t realized he’d been waiting for permission, but once it was given, he curled up into the heat of his Alpha’s body, letting his eyes slip shut as he focused on controlling his breathing. A part of him felt embarrassed to be reacting like this, but another, more logical part of his brain (that sounded a lot like Jared, for some reason) told him that he had never been in such a volatile and dangerous situation before. In the blink of an eye, everything could have gone to hell, and that knowledge, combined with the fact that he had family, had Jared, to lose? It was a potent mix for him to deal with.

A thought popped into his head, and he forced his sluggish mind to voice it. “Are you okay?” he slurred. “You’re either hiding it, or handling it a lot better than me.”

“I’m okay,” Jared laughed softly, long fingers carding almost absently though his tousled hair. “And I had something you didn’t have.”

“What?”

“Faith in you.” Jensen could hear the Alpha’s smile in his voice. “I wasn’t so afraid of things turning south, because I trusted you. You told me we’d be okay, and I knew you meant it. You were in your element, Jen…there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that you were going to play an ace.”

Jensen managed a wan smile, finally regaining some semblance of equilibrium. He didn’t think he’d be running a marathon soon, but he felt comfortable enough to open his eyes, look at the openly trusting look on his Alpha’s face. “That wasn’t an ace, Jay,” he huffed a small laugh. “An ace would have been a done deal…no, I was playing a deuce.”

“The wild card,” Jared smirked. “Just like you.”

The knowingness in Jared’s expression…

“You knew I was fishing,” Jensen surmised, his smile growing at the epiphany. “You knew I didn’t have the full story, and you still believed that I would come through?”

Leaning down, Jared pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the sensitive spot beneath his ear. “You’ve never let me down, Jen. And you always figure it out.”

Warmth blossomed in his chest at the display of blatant confidence in him. Jared, ever since that day in Chemistry when he’d fallen into the Alpha’s chest, always had a way of making him feel like he could do anything. Like he was invincible.

He wished he was, for Jared’s sake.

“Jensen, honey,” Jared’s mom bustled in, her usual smile conspicuously absent as tension and worry wore down her features. “How are you feeling?” she asked, offering him a glass of water and pressing her hand gently against his forehead.

Jensen leaned into the motherly touch, accepting the glass and thumbing the drops of condensation
that were running down the sides. “I’m fine, Mam,” he answered in what he hoped was a reassuring voice. “Just a little bit of an adrenaline drop.” He took a small sip of the icy water, only to deepen it into a gulp when he realized how thirsty he actually was. The frigid beverage slid down his throat, energizing him and helping to clear his fuzzy mind. “Thank you for all this,” he added politely, gesticulating around the living room haphazardly, not forgetting the manners that Jody had drilled into him.

He was aghast, and more than a little confused, when the words prompted tears from Sherry Padalecki.

A quick glance up told him that his boyfriend was even more frozen than he was, and obviously wasn’t going to be much of a help. Fighting back the urge to roll his eyes, he forced himself to stand up.

“Oh, no, no,” Sherry tried to wave him back down, swiping at her tears with shaking hands. “I’m okay, sweetie, you need to…”

“It’s alright, mam,” he interrupted in a soothing voice, catching one of her hands and gently maneuvering her on to the couch. It was easier than he expected, slipping into the role of comforter, even without completely shedding his JR skin. He knelt on the floor in front of her, smiling reassuringly and keeping a firm gaze locked on hers, so that she could see the truth in his words. “This was doubtlessly harder for you than it was for me. But it’s okay now,” he repeated the words that Jared had told him, meeting hazel eyes over Mrs. Padalecki’s head with a smile. “It’s over.”

Sherry grasped his hands, ignoring her tears now. “Jensen, honey, you saved my entire family,” she told him solemnly. “You saved our pack, all of our homes…”

“No, mam,” he shook his head, trying to deflect the gratitude that shouldn’t have been aimed at him. “I’m pretty much the reason this nearly happened, I was really just doing the least I could do.”

“You’re wrong.”

For the second time that day, Gerald Padalecki’s words mystified him. He looked up to where Jeff and Gerald stood, both of them with their gazes fixed on him. While Jeff looked fond and grateful, he couldn’t read the eldest Padalecki, and that more than anything prompted him to stand up, muscles coiled in defense.

Gerald took a step closer to him, and Jared seemed to be acting instinctively too, since he immediately stood, angling himself protectively in front of Jensen. The reaction caused a flicker of something to pass through the current Alpha’s eyes; something that looked an awful lot like self-recrimination…could even pass for guilt if Jensen didn’t know any better.

Before the eldest Padalecki could expound on his sweeping statement, a blur of yellow and white rushed passed him and barreled into Jared, who in turn stumbled back into Jensen. Thankfully, JR was still firmly entrenched in him, and so were his reflexes; hooking an arm around Jared’s waist ended what could have amounted to a foray into human dominos. His boyfriend threw him a grateful smile as he reassured a tearful Megan that yes, he was okay, and that yes, everything would continue to be okay.

Though it had happened no less than an hour ago at his and Jared’s home, Jensen was still caught off guard when he received the same reception from the youngest Padalecki. His face colored at the audience that he had, but the strange pull of protectiveness he had over the shaking form in his arms demanded that he offer comfort first and foremost.
“We’re all good, Megs,” he told her soothingly, his voice sure. “I told you we would be.”

The teen nodded, looking up to aim wide eyes at him, unshed tears glistening brightly. “But what if we’d left?” she asked miserably, far too much guilt weighing down her little shoulders. From the almost unnoticeable flinch that he caught from his lover, Jared had wondered the same thing, and his answer was as much for Megan’s reassurance as it was for Jared’s.

“Never would have happened.” His declaration rang with conviction. “I’d have never allowed Jared to choose.”

Damn if Jensen didn’t feel ten feet tall when finally- finally- a smile came upon Megan’s face.

And damn if he didn’t feel like Jared’s brand of invincible when his lover mouthed a silent thank you at him, for the message that he had caught behind Jensen’s words.

Like an invisible burden being lifted, both Jared and Megan’s shoulders relaxed, and if nothing else, he was happy that he could provide that much absolution.

~*Jared*~

Typical. It was damn typical of his beautiful, stubborn, perfect, self-sacrificing mate to be offering comfort instead of allowing himself to bask in theirs. Although he did admit that Jen had soothed his own guilt over wanting to leave, he also knew that his mate needed some reassurance himself, maybe even more so than them. Without mincing words, Jensen had faced down an entire army of Weres in a bid to keep his pack safe, had put himself in the forefront of the battle, armed with nothing but a suspicion, a brilliant mind, sharp eyes, and even sharper wit.

As his mate looked at him now, standing tall and strong despite the bruises still visible on his face from his father’s attack…he wondered how it took him this long to recognize Jensen as his Beta. Pride had his Alpha preening on the inside, but in a show of prioritization, he turned to face his father, body still shielding his mate.

He had been lax up until now, but he was back in the game, and no one was getting to his mate without going through him. Not for a long while.

“Meg, go upstairs,” he directed, allowing some of his own Alpha tenor to seep into his voice. He could feel the outrage from his little sister, and nearly rolled his eyes when he heard Jensen mumble,

“He means to say, will you please let us talk this out with your parents? We’ll find you when we’re done, we won’t leave without telling you.”

His sister was more than pacified by his beautiful Beta, and she headed upstairs with considerably more grace that she might have a few moments ago. Biting back the urge to gloat about how diplomatic and gentle his mate was, Jared instead just wrapped an arm around Jensen’s waist, dragging him close and molding his Beta to the side of his body, even as he remained angled protectively in front of him.

Based on the kind of day they’d had, Jared didn’t think he could be blamed for his aggressive tone. “My mate still has the bruises on his face from your hand, dad. You have a limited time to speak here, so make good use of it.”
His mom’s gasp overrode what his father might have been about to say. Unheeding of his arm around Jensen, Sherry tilted Jensen’s face towards the light, inspecting the mottled bruise that spanned the length of his jaw and spiraled up his temple.

“Gerald Padalecki!” she snapped, turning around to face him with her hands on his hips. Jared didn’t know whether to be amused or surprised at the chagrined look on his father’s face. “I could just beat you around the head with my spoon!”

An awkward sort of silence descended upon them at witnessing Alpha Gerald Padalecki being admonished like a disobedient pup. The tension was shattered by the most unlikely of things; his mate snorted under his breath, biting hard on his lip, but unable to stop the giggles that escaped from him.

Jeff took that as permission to allow a snicker to fall from his lips, and even Jared couldn’t help but smile, especially when he felt Jensen’s silent laughter start to shake his mate’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Jensen apologized around a muted chuckle, “but you’re kinda badass, Mrs. P.”

A part of Jared was exasperated at his mate, for finding levity in what was supposed to be a very serious discussion, but the more dominant part of him was alight with warmth. Being able to ease the tension in a high-stress situation was something Jen was good at, something he hadn’t been able to fully appreciate until now. Now, when they had all been standing on a precipice that could have thrown them into an abyss so easily, only to be dragged from the edge by Jensen’s soothing nature.

He watched as a silent discussion took place between his parents, a lot less tense than he’d been a few seconds ago. It was fun to watch them, knowing that he shared the same thing with his mate, and he would have been lying if he said that he wasn’t the teensiest bit smug that Jensen could read his Were thoughts in human form.

Special, amazing, fantastic, beautiful Beta mate.

“Enough with the posturing, Jay,” Jensen elbowed him lightly, smiling to soften the whispered reproach. “You’ve been doing it most of the day.”

“Not my fault that my pretty, pretty mate gives me so much to brag about,” he grinned, leering enough to make Jensen blush.

“I’m not pretty,” Jen groused, pinching his side. “And you’re biased.”

“How about beautiful?” Jared teased. A mischievous sparkle twinkled in his eyes as he reached the hand around his mate’s waist down to squeeze his ass. “Or sexy?” he growled suggestively into Jensen’s ear, chuckling when his only response was a muted squeak and another blush.

His groping was out of view of the rest of the Padaleckis, but even so, he lifted his hand after a minute, urged on by the fact that his momma was in the room, which was a definite mood killer. He consoled himself by nipping territorially at the soft skin underneath Jensen’s jaw, with a whispered promise of, “Later.”

From Jensen’s shiver, he wasn’t the only one who was already counting the seconds.

He straightened up as his mom left, his guard coming back up. His father sensed it, and another look of guilt crossed his eyes.

“Jensen.” To all of their surprise, the elder Alpha directly addressed his mate. “To be quite honest…” he hesitated for a second, looking like he was struggling to find the right words. “I’m not sure
whether I should start with an apology or my gratitude.”

A minute tremor rocked Jensen’s body, and Jared tightened his arm, offering his support. Fighting back against his volatile temper, he managed to stay quiet while Jensen recovered from his shock. He knew enough of his lover to know that a defense wasn’t necessary- not yet- so he dutifully kept his mouth shut.

Finally, Jensen raised a hand to run through his tousled, dirty-blonde spikes, blowing a breath through his teeth. “You don’t owe me any gratitude, Sir. Today shouldn’t have happened to begin with…”

“Exactly,” Gerald interrupted, shaking his head tiredly. Suddenly, his once infallible dad looked older than he had ever seen him. A part of Jared softened; his father looked genuinely remorseful, and while it was Jensen he would have to make it up to, Jared decided he wasn’t going to be difficult about it, provided that his mate was treated right this time. “Nothing like this should have happened, and yet it did, on my watch. Yours were the actions that saved our pack, today, that saved our homes.”

He could feel the moment Jensen let go of any ill feelings towards his father; muscles uncoiled from their instinctively defensive posture and a small sigh escaped his full lips.

“Mistakes have been made, Sir,” he allowed. “By all of us. We should never have kept things a secret from you when it involved the pack. However...the important thing isn’t fixating on who spilled the most milk; it’s finding a way to mop the mess up so no one ends up slipping on it.”

Gerald nodded, a look akin to respect flashing across his face. “Ordinarily, I would have agreed with that. Probably would have suggested it myself. However...I think that, if I’ve driven my sons to the point where they’d be happier away from home…it’s come time to mend some fences.”

His mate’s eyes flicked quickly to his before returning to his father’s. “Would you like me to give y’all some privacy?”

His dad flinched. “That would be my first mistake,” he shook his head ruefully. “I should never have isolated you the way I did.” His gaze transferred to Jeff. “The same way that I shouldn’t have isolated Valerie.”

Jeff was quiet, and Jared watched as a plethora of expressions flashed through his brother’s eyes.

“What’s brought this on, Dad?” Jeff finally asked, moving to stand a little closer to them. “Why the sudden change of heart?”

Jared was glad he’d asked, because he couldn’t quite bring himself to do it. All the hurt, all the pain that had been festering since the first time he’d brought his mate home…it felt like it was killing him. All the fighting he’d done with the person he thought would always have his back…

He had begun to resign himself; begun to accept that he couldn’t have the both his family, and the man he loved. With the possibility staring him in the face now, taunting him with how enticing it was, it was incredibly difficult to trust himself. He didn’t know whether he wanted to beg for the chance to have it all, or whether he wanted to stand firm and tell his dad that the damage was too far gone.

To all of their surprise, it wasn’t Gerald that answered.

“The prospect of losing his family is enough to make a man capable of anything.”
Jensen’s eyes were trained on the Senior Padalecki as he spoke, and Jared’s fingers were unresponsive as Jensen pulled away from his protective hold. Inching forward almost cautiously, his mate stood in between them, the perfect picture of a mediator.

“That’s what changed your mind, isn’t it Sir?” Jensen asked gently, with all the caution of an experienced negotiator approaching a hostage situation. “It was seeing how easily today could have turned bloody, and knowing how badly things would have been left.”

“I always thought that I had time to figure everything out.” Despite everything, the anguish in his father’s voice struck Jared deeply. The little boy in him felt scared at the prospect of his hero being vulnerable, even as the adult in him wanted to extend a hand to the father that had always had his own hand out to him. Save the man who had saved him from his fears more times than he remembered.

“After the fight with Jeff,” his father continued, looking at his older brother, “I thought that one day, I would be able to patch things up. When the twins were born, I thought that I could make my apologies then, beg you to see my grandsons. Both times, the need to be a fearless and unyielding Alpha overrode all of my better instincts. It happened again with you, son.” Jared started as his father’s eyes found his. “I did the same thing, except I went so far as to degrade your mate, insult him, even offer him money to go away.”

An involuntary growl escaped his lips; Jensen had never mentioned that particular detail to him.

His father kept speaking, either heedless or desperate. “All of this and I still foolishly thought that you two would forgive me. When Morgan came today…I realized that I don’t have the time I once thought I had. And if I continued the way I was, I wouldn’t have sons to forgive me anymore, either.”

Finally, the eldest Padalecki shifted his gaze back to Jensen.

“Back at the park,” Gerald spoke in a low voice, “you told me that you knew Jared was yours, and that you were his. You told me that just because I was too bigoted to see it, that didn’t mean it wasn’t true.”

Jensen flinched slightly, even as Jared barely buried his proud beam.

“About that…” Jensen rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “I’m sor-“

“Don’t,” Gerald chuckled slightly, shaking his head. “I learnt several things from that encounter. One, being that you have balls of steel, Kid.”

Jensen let out a surprised laugh, and Jared and Jeff exchanged faintly mystified grins.

“You got guts, and I deeply respect that. Secondly,” the Alpha continued, “it was the damn truth. Granted, it was a truth I wasn’t ready to face, and one I definitely wasn’t ready to have slammed into my face, but it was a truth nonetheless.”

That cautious hope that had been bubbling under the surface of Jared’s emotions, grew. Did his father…was he saying what Jared desperately wanted him to say?

“Thirdly,” his father still hadn’t broken eye-contact with his mate, “there are only a few people on the face of this earth who have the strength and sheer nerve to face down an Alpha were. Not only face down, but stand up against, and set straight.” Finally, brown eyes found his own. “It is the mark of a true, and truly strong Beta.”
Jared wasn’t sure he could speak if he tried. He was fairly certain his brother and mate were experiencing the same problem, but his father seemed to be on a roll, stepping carefully closer to Jensen as he spoke.

“It was at that moment that I realized what a short-sighted, narrow-minded fool I had become. Here, a human, my youngest son’s mate, knew better than me. Could find it in himself to stick up for the people he considered family—pack—when I couldn’t do the same with my own sons. I knew then, that you were definitely Jared’s Beta, and that you both would far surpass what we’ve been able to build the pack to.” A remorseful look dominated Gerald’s face, making him look years older than he was. “I could blame what happened next on several things. I could say it was the pain of realizing how much better you were than I thought. How much better than me you were. I could say it was the disappointment in myself for letting myself become nothing better than a closed-minded control freak. I could even say that it was the anger for the points you were making, that I so didn’t want to hear. But nothing,” he shook his head vehemently, “nothing, not one single thing, could excuse what I did. Not a damn thing.” Slowly, so as not to startle him, Gerald lifted his hand and pressed his fingertips lightly over the bruises marring Jensen’s pale skin. “This never should have happened, and I will always regret that I ever allowed myself to stoop this low.”

Taking advantage of their continued silence, his father addressed them all once again, without moving from where he stood. For once, Jared’s Alpha was calm, content to allow his father’s proximity to his mate, not sensing any danger to the man he loved.

“Jeff,” his father spoke softly. “I’m so sorry for never making Valerie feel at home here, when she should have been. I’m sorry for making it so that you feel like they aren’t welcome here, and I’m especially sorry for how long it’s taken me to make this right. I hope you and your beautiful wife can forgive me…and maybe allow your mother and I to meet our grandsons.”

Gerald turned to Jared next, and the Alpha heir forced himself not to flinch underneath the sudden attention. He straightened where he stood, and Jared didn’t miss the flash of pride in his father’s eyes for it.

“Jared, I’m sorry for everything I’ve put you through these past few months.”

A part of him felt surprised at the continued show of emotion from the very man who once told him that strong Alphas never allowed their feelings to rule them. He shut that part of himself up, intent on listening to what his father had to say.

“As my heir, I was worried that you were making a choice that could bring our pack and your family under attack,” his father explained, an almost chagrined look in his eyes. “As my youngest son, I was afraid that you were going to get your heart broken. Humans, no offence,” he added quickly, glancing at Jensen, “were never painted in a very favorable light to me. I was taught from a young age that Were lived peacefully among them, but never trusted them. I’m sorry that my prejudices and doubts encroached on the things that should have made you the happiest man alive.” Suddenly, a melancholic smile lifted Gerald’s lips. “You’ve grown up into a fine, strong, capable Alpha, son. I’m incredibly proud of you, and you’ve proven to me countless times during this debacle that you are going to be everything great that I could never have had the courage to be. You did good, buddy.”

The childhood endearment nearly did him in; as it was, he was struggling to maintain his composure in the light of his father’s—his hero’s—pride.

As his father turned to Jensen, he found himself holding his breath. Jared knew that, despite the apologies Jeff and him had received, it would be the next words out of his father’s mouth that would decide the entire course of action moving forward.
As though he sensed the invisible pressure being put on his words, Gerald Padalecki took a deep breath.

Jared braced himself.

~*Jensen*~

He hadn’t felt this nervous facing off against Morgan.

Jared might not have been in his wolf form, but the bond between them was stronger than describable, and Jensen knew exactly how his lover was feeling. He picked out the love and pride and happiness and relief and hope easily enough. The importance his Alpha was placing on the eldest Padalecki’s words also wasn’t lost on him, and he hoped for Jared’s sake as much as his own that Gerald meant what he was saying about the acceptance.

He locked eyes with the seasoned Alpha, bracing himself for the worst but daring to hope for the best.

“I’m sorry.”

Jensen blinked owlishly. Despite everything that the older man had said thus far, he hadn’t expected to be given the words. He knew the man was remorseful over what had happened between them all, but he had thought that the clear apology in his eyes was enough to bury the proverbial hatchet. He didn’t need the lengthy apology; just as long as Gerald had given Jared the absolution his lover had wanted, Jensen was content.

“Sir, you really don’t…”

“I do,” Gerald interrupted him again. “I’m so sorry for the manner in which I’ve treated you. I’m sorry for every harsh word I’ve thrown at you, and for every unfounded doubt and misconception, and most of all, I’m sorry for ever laying a hand on you. I can’t promise that I’ll never have reservations, and I can’t promise that I’ll always have the best decorum when pointing those misgivings out,” he smiled wryly, in that infectious way that Jared seemed to have inherited from him, and Jensen had to grin back. “But,” he continued, shrugging lightly, “I can promise that I will try to keep from stepping on any toes, and that I will be trying my utmost to treat you with the respect that you rightfully deserve.” Solemn eyes sought his out, and the current Alpha grasped his shoulder in a strong grip. “I’m sorry that I underestimated what a powerful and advantageous addition you are to this pack. I saw today, your true worth, and I apologize for allowing things to go this far before I made myself recognize it.”

Jensen thought that it would be difficult. He thought that he would never know how to respond, and never know how to handle a situation so focused on him.

In the end, it came to him as naturally as breathing.

“It’s okay, Sir. Apology accepted.”

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Needs a little more silver, Jensen decided, looking at the painting in front of him.
It was one of his frees, and as he had been doing for the better part of the week, he was using his time to perfect the oil painting of the Jay Star that he had promised Jared on their first date. It seemed like a lifetime ago, now, and when Jensen realized that he’d never made good on his promise, he figured it would double as one of the birthday presents he gave his loveable mate.

Jared’s birthday was still three weeks away, granted, but Jensen was already planning to make everything as perfect as humanly (and werewolf-ly) possible. For once, things were quiet and peaceful in their lives, and Jensen was determined to give Jared an amazing birthday for everything that the Alpha had been through the past few months.

Aside from the painting, Jensen was arranging a surprise party for his lover at the club, and thanks in large part to Chris’ repeated pushing, he was going to sing for Jared in front of all their friends. He knew how it had made the Alpha feel before, in front of strangers, and he knew it would be more powerful in front of their group of friends and pack family. He wasn’t sure, yet, what song he would sing, but he knew that Chris had a couple of ideas.

His biggest plan, and gift, was also his most closely guarded secret. Making a call to Dean and Benny, and some of his other JR associates, he’d managed to call in an obscene amount of favors and acquire all the necessary parts to fully restore Jared’s grandfather’s Impala. His lover had some wonderful memories of the car, and it was easy to see how important it was to him. More to the point, Jensen loved cars and engines even more than he loved Chemistry, and just as much as he loved his art. It had been something Eric had taught him when he was younger, and from his time as JR, he had only learnt more of the inner workings of cars.

So while the parts, favors inclusive, had cost him more than he cared to admit, he was most excited about that gift. His cover stories with Eric running thin, Jensen had moved back home, and Jared had went home too, so that left their little home uninhabited, and ergo the perfect working space for his restoration plans.

Jared being home had provided the illusion of safety and a united front for the pack, which greatly added to the smoothness of the past week. It was incredibly odd, however, to go to bed every night without his mate’s strong arms encompassing him, and both of them were still trying valiantly to readjust to not being within arms’ reach of the other anymore.

He missed Jared something fierce, even here in school where he was literally just a few corridors away. He knew his lover felt the same, and he briefly wondered whether he should hunt the Alpha down where he was probably on his way to English. Before he could decide, his phone buzzed insistently in his pocket, and he grinned when he read the caller ID.

“I was just wondering whether I should track you down and come say hi,” he informed his mate in lieu of greeting. “Even five minutes before you go to class would be better than nothing.”

He could practically see Jared’s responding smile. “Good to know I’m not the only one going ten types of crazy missing my mate. Let’s go out tonight, baby, just you and me.”

Warmth bubbled in his chest at the thought. “Yeah, of course, Jay,” he didn’t hesitate to agree. “Where do you wanna go?”

“I was worried you’d have to work,” Jared told him happily, and Jensen smiled at the excitement in the Alpha’s tone. “Seeing as how you’re off…let me take you to dinner?” he suggested hopefully. “Someplace quiet, where we can be alone. I don’t want to share you with anyone tonight, baby, and I think you could do with a night away from the loudness that is the club.”

“Sounds just about perfect, Jay,” he admitted. “I don’t really feel like sharing you tonight either.”

“Should I expect flowers and a personal violinist at the table, too?”

Jared snorted at the perfectly level voice of his sarcasm. “Red roses, and he’s actually a sax player.”

“Ooh, going all out, Jay,” he snarked, feeling a grin pull at his lips. “I’ll try to keep from swooning too much.”

The Alpha laughed again, and the sound was like an anchor to Jensen, grounding him where Jared’s absence had left him feeling afloat. He sensed that something else was on his mate’s mind, and he waited patiently as Jared worked up the nerve to tell him, swishing barely-there strokes of silver into the gold of the Jay Star.

“Can I ask you something, Jen?”

“Mm,” Jensen hummed immediately. “Anything, Jay.”

“Do you think I’m weak for wanting to forgive my father so easily?” Jared asked in a small, almost timid voice. “Jeff had the courage to walk away, defending his mate. Aren’t you mad that I didn’t?”

After Jensen had accepted Gerald’s apology, things had settled down with an ease that almost startled the artist. It seemed that everyone had taken their cues from his reaction, all of them willing to forgive Gerald, just as long as he had, too. Once gaping wounds were healing slowly, and Jensen had wondered when this moment would come.

Too much had happened for him to hope that they would all become one big happy family overnight; he knew that, and he accepted it. They had to deal with everything in their own ways, and Jensen was irrationally happy that Jared was allowing him to help in whatever way he could.

“Not mad, Jay,” he reassured his boyfriend gently. “Never mad. I’m proud of you.” He could practically hear Jared’s skepticism over the phone, and he sighed. He knew he had but one chance to say this right, and he also knew that saying the right thing in this case, was the difference between healing the wound, and opening it up to infection.

Finally, he spoke, his voice soft and his tone ardent. “It takes an enormous amount of courage and strength to hold on to two different pieces of rope that you felt were pulling you in different directions. It’s the mark of a true leader, Jay. Anyone can run away, but it takes the truly great to stick around and either find a way, or to make one.” He let his words sink in fully for a minute, before adding, “You’re the strongest man and Alpha I know, Jared Padalecki. Don’t for one second think you’re weak…loving your family and fighting for them are some of the reasons that I’m so madly in love with you, and they’re also reasons that you’re more powerful than the others. The most powerful leaders, Jay, are the ones who aren’t afraid to feel.”

Jensen hated that his lover always second guessed his emotional side, and he was determined to make the Alpha see that his heart was his biggest asset, not his biggest risk.

Which was why he was so happy when Jared accepted his answer. More than just listened to it, he had accepted it, and when they reluctantly hung up because Jared’s English teacher had walked in, Jensen felt the tiniest bit lighter for it.

Dropping his dirty paintbrush into the pot of murky water next to him, Jensen stretched, his back cracking as his joints fell back into place. He had been hunched over that painting far too long, but he was way too happy about the end result to be concerned for the protests his neck was making. Taking care to hide the still-wet canvas behind some of his other works, he began humming inanely
under his breath, reveling in the simplicity of getting ready for his boyfriend’s birthday without some sort of imminent threat looming above their heads.

Really, Jensen should have known better than to test Fate.

As he moved to the basin to wash his hands, Jensen was stopped dead in his tracks but a fierce, sharp burst of pain through his head. With a small, agonized cry, he fell to the cold floor, barely registering the sharp crack as his knees collided with the tiles. Amidst the awful searing in his head, all other pain was overshadowed.

“Jared,” he whimpered softly, instinctively, as another bolt of agony tore through him, relentless, mocking, violent. Curling into a fetal position, he gripped his head, small mewls of pain escaping his lips as he prayed to whoever might have been listening, for the awful hurt to stop. Shutting his eyes against the onslaught of agony, his eyelids were suddenly painted with images. Images that weren’t familiar to him, and images that he, by all rights and demands, should not have in his head.

*Darkness.*

*Howling winds nearly bending the trees around him.*

*The feel of crunchy soil against his palm.*

*A flash of black and amber.*

*Phantom taunts and malevolent laughter filling the still air around him.*

*Ripping pain.*

With a half gasp, half strangled cry, Jensen returned to his senses. As abruptly as it had come, the pain had disappeared, and he was left on the floor, gasping and winded and confused, and aching for the comfort of his mate. He palmed roughly at his chest, half-expecting to find it ripped up and bleeding, and starting visibly when his hand touched nothing but soft plaid and warm skin.

*What had just happened?*

###

Chapter End Notes

So...did I completely blow this chapter, like I was afraid I would?! So anxious!! Let me know, guys! Much love! <3
Normalcy is Overrated

Chapter Notes

I'm so glad I didn't blow the last chapter! As per my usual torture, this is a fluffy chapter; happy times, but no answers just yet! *Cue evil laughter*

Thanks to all my wonderful readers for the great feedback!! Love y'all! <3

This is for jodiebeth- thanks for peeking out from the woodwork hon!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

“Fuck!”

Jensen grimaced in pain, instinctively sucking his throbbing index finger into his mouth and wincing at the coppery taste of blood that exploded across his tongue. He glared at the underneath of the Impala’s hood, wondering what he possibly could have touched that managed to slice his finger open.

“I told you to be careful,” Chris piped up from behind him. He redirected his glare to his best friend, who unabashedly smirked at him in amusement.

“You could try not to look so entertained, Kane,” he grumbled around his wounded finger. Chris laughed, ducking when Jensen threw an oil-stained rag at him. Ignoring his pseudo-brother, Jensen sucked his finger one last time before inspecting the jagged cut. As soon as it left the suction of his mouth, red beaded across it rapidly once more.

“S’it deep?” Chris asked, and even though there was still some amusement in his eyes, Jensen was appeased by the soft gentleness in his tone. Kane could tease all he wanted, but when it came down to it, Jensen knew that his protective instincts outweighed everything.

“Naw,” he shook his head with a small smile. “Not deep enough to need stitches, at least. Just gonna have to put some pressure on it.”

Chris wordlessly tore off a clean piece of the old t-shirt Jensen was going to use to wash the car, offering it to him.

“Thanks,” he mumbled absently as he tied the strip around his finger, using his teeth to pull at the opposite length of fabric.

Chris regarded him speculatively. “You’re pretty adept with injuries, Freckles,” he observed, with forced casualness.

“Mm,” Jensen nodded serenely without missing a beat. “More or less had to be when I was JR.”

His best friend smirked at the name, distracted just like Jensen intended him to be. “Damn,” he
chuckled gleefully, “I still can’t believe the way you tore down Morgan’s whole plan like that. That was so fucking hardcore, man! I think half our pack might have fallen in love with you after seeing that.”

Jensen winced. “Don’t tell Jared that. I don’t want to have to convince him another time, not to leave his pack.”

“Noted,” Chris snickered. “Seriously though, even after you told me about that time in your life, I never expected to see you become such a badass. It was like seeing a different person.”

“It was a different person,” he corrected lightly. “JR is someone full of false confidence and the kind of swagger that comes from always expecting to be right. He’s also someone who can switch off all his emotions and evaluate any scenario with a kind of heartless criticality.” Looking up into enraptured blue eyes, Jensen shrugged. “I’m not really like that. I just had to become like that to fit in, and stay ten steps in front of everyone else.”

“I hear that,” his best friend nodded. “While I’m glad you don’t have to be him anymore, I’m also glad I got to see him once.” He grinned mischievously. “At least now I know the type of guy behind the name I’m gonna throw around if I’m ever around a gang.”

Jensen threw his head back with a laugh, reaching up to pull the hood of the Impala down. He tapped the car affectionately after closing it, throwing his words over his shoulder, “Let’s hope you never have to throw my name around, man.” He flicked his head at the passenger’s side door. “Hop in. Let’s see if she’s running.”

He really hoped it would. He had no time left, really, and he couldn’t afford for anything to go wrong. Jared still hadn’t told him it was his birthday- it was a good thing that Jensen remembered his boyfriend mentioning his birth date when they’d first become Chemistry partners- but that didn’t mean that Jensen had unlimited time. He had to be ready in time for the surprise party he was planning for Jared at the club for that night.

In the spirit of secrecy, Jensen had enlisted Chris’ help, so Jared wouldn’t get suspicious of all the times Jensen couldn’t see him. Kane had dutifully spent afternoons with him without complaint, and he thought it was only fair to let him be there when he first turned the ignition in the beautiful car.

He slid his body into the driver’s seat, patting the dashboard lovingly as he did. “Come on, baby,” he murmured. “Jay’s birthday is in two days. Now, we’ve spent just under three weeks together, and we’ve had some good times, right? Now, I need you to work with me, okay? You can do it, baby, come on.”

He fitted the key into the ignition, ignoring Chris’ incredulous look.

“Are you…did you seriously just talk to the car?” he asked disbelievingly. “It’s just a…”

“Shut up!” he snapped, before caressing the wheel with his left hand. “Don’t listen to the mean old hippie, baby,” he cooed, “he just doesn’t understand you.”

“Jesus Christ…”

Steadfastly disregarding Chris’ grumbles, he took a deep breath and turned the key…

…grinning like a maniac when a deep, throaty purr permeated the air around them.

He let his head fall back on to the seat. “Mm,” he sighed happily. “Atta girl.”
“Better not act like this when you show Jared the car,” Chris snarked. “He’s supposed to be the only one who makes you orgasm, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want him destroying the car after you spent three weeks fixing it.”

Jensen was about to retort with a snippy comeback, when he allowed himself to really think about Kane’s words. “Huh.” He frowned, huffing a breath. “I guess you have a good fucking point, man.”

###

“You reek, sport.”

Jensen huffed a breath and rolled his eyes, half exasperated at the greeting and half amused at his childhood nickname slipping out so naturally after all these years. “Hi to you too, Dad,” he returned sarcastically, bypassing the kitchen island where Eric sat reading the paper with a cup of coffee. He reached into the fridge and grabbed a bottle of water, realizing only belatedly that for the first time in years, the term ‘Dad’ had come off his tongue as easily as Eric calling him by his nickname.

“Hi, back,” his foster father’s smirking face distracted him from thinking about it too much. “You reek, sport.”

“Yeah,” he snorted, mirth warming his chest. “Spending the afternoon under the hood of a car will do that to you.” He held up his oil-greased hands for effect.

Eric wrinkled his nose. “Get into the shower, B.A. Baracus.”

Jensen feigned a confused frown. “Who’s that?”

The splutter that came from his foster father and the subsequent widening of his eyes made it difficult for Jensen to keep a straight face, but it was worth it when, two minutes later, Eric deflated.

“I’m so old,” he lamented, adopting a sulky expression.

“Don’t be a crazy fool,” Jensen imitated B.A’s accent with a grin as he left the kitchen. “The A-Team is awesome through all generations.”

The sound of Eric’s booming laughter followed him all the way up the stairs.

He went straight into the bathroom, stripping out of his sweaty clothes and nearly humming in relief as the sticky clothing left his filthy body. Something small hit against his sternum, and he glanced down, smiling widely when he saw the pendant sitting snug on his chest. Even after three weeks of its constant presence around his neck, he never failed to be filled with a burst of love, seeing it there. As he climbed into the shower, he thought about the night he had first felt it around his neck…

~ *Three weeks ago* ~

“You think this is what normal couples feel like?” Jared teased him. They were walking hand in hand back to the truck, after enjoying their first real date since the day Jared took him to their meadow.

It had been nothing short of amazing. They’d gone to this semi-casual restaurant, a family establishment, whose steaks were something Jensen would swear his life on. It was quiet; just the
two of them, a corner table tucked neatly away from full view, being together. It was like something out of a fairytale, and they’d spent the entire time talking and laughing, while the world stopped existing outside of them.

Through the entire meal, Jensen had managed to keep the afternoon’s strange happenings from Jared. Honestly, he didn’t know how he was going to tell his boyfriend about the strange images…the visions. How would he even go about bringing that up?

_Hey Jay! How was your day? Mine was okay, except for this creepy vision that made me feel like my brain was melting in my cranial cavity…but on the plus side, I totally aced my Calculus pop quiz! So where are we going for dinner tonight, hm?

Not exactly something to be slipped into casual conversation.

Now, as Jared mentioned that dreaded word…normal…Jensen had to wonder how Jared was going to react to his disturbing little development.

“Normal by whose standard?” he asked lightly as he rounded the truck and got in. He waited until they were both buckled up before adding, “I mean, sometimes normalcy is overrated.”

“Nuh-uh,” Jared shook his head emphatically. “Not with us, baby. I mean, seriously,” Jared shook his head, a small shudder ripping through him as he turned to look at Jensen. “I spent the whole week on edge, scared out of my mind that Abel was going to blindside you at school for what happened between the packs. I would have skipped all my classes and shadowed you all day if I thought I could’ve gotten away with it! No, baby,” Jared turned to face him, residual fear plain as day in his hazel eyes. “We need some peace and quiet in our lives. Just some time without any sort of danger or drama.”

Jensen looked up at his lover’s fear-addled face and something inside him pinched uncomfortably. Things had finally become a little easier on them, and Jared had finally been able to relax into their relationship. Guilt hung heavily from the artist, hating that Jared had spent a week distracted by fear for his safety; fear that was far too familiar set against his Alpha’s handsome features. He had no idea what had happened earlier in the afternoon… how could he possibly drag Jared into another problem, one that might not even be a big deal anyway? How could he take away what little peace they had managed to salvage in their relationship? How could he do any of this to Jared, so close to his lover’s birthday, no less?

The answer was simple. He couldn’t.

“Hey,” his hand found Jared’s curling around it soothingly. It was his turn to protect Jared, and he would tell his mate about the mysterious… headache, or whatever it was, just as soon as his birthday was over. Armed with that reasoning, the lie fell easily from his lips. “Well, things are normal with us for once, and we’re doing this, so I guess yeah; this is what normal couples feel like.”

Jared smiled brightly at him as he pulled up in front of Jensen’s house. “In that case, I think this is the part of the date where I give you a present.”

Jensen laughed, forcing his doubts and reservations to the back of his mind. “I hate to break it to you, Mr. Apple Pie Life, but I don’t think gift-giving is part of standard, second official date protocol.”

“What’s standard, second official date protocol?”

“Constant kissing and covert groping at the table and trying to cop a feel again when you kiss me goodnight at my doorstep,” Jensen answered with a completely straight face.
Jared laughed loudly, and the sound affirmed Jensen’s decision; he couldn’t bring more stress to his Alpha than he already did. He had to give Jared some time to normal. His Alpha deserved a freaking break.

“Can I give you a present anyway?” he asked, almost shyly.

“If you tell me why,” he bargained curiously. “I mean, I didn’t get you anything, Jay.”

“That’s okay,” his boyfriend hastened to assure him. “This is just…something I saw that I wanted you to have. My only claim on you, is one that other people don’t really get to see,” Jared’s hand found his throat, his thumb dipping just beneath the collar and rubbing at the hickey he’d sucked there, just above Jensen’s pulse point. “I guess it’s more of a selfish gift. I want something to show that you’re mine, baby.”

“Hey.” Jensen caught his lover’s hand, holding it there and aiming serious eyes at him. “You know that I am, right? Yours, I mean? Stupid question,” he rolled his eyes as soon as the enquiry left his mouth. “But you need to know, I’ve been yours since day one.”

“I know,” Jared leaned forward, pressing a kiss just underneath Jensen’s jaw, forcing him to tilt his head upwards slightly. His breathing hitched when without warning, something cold and flat landed against his skin, Jared’s nimble fingers fiddling at the nape of his neck. “But still. Until I can claim you in every other way, this will have to do.”

Jensen peered down to find a stunning pendant resting against his breastbone. A soundless gasp left his lips; it was made from copper, as best he could tell, and hung from his neck with a simple black cord. It showed a crescent moon with a wolf resting on the bottom tip of the moon, head tilted up in a howl. It was about as thick as a penny, and laid flat against his skin, but the wolf seemed almost lifelike in its detail, and when he looked a little closer, he found a ‘J’ engraved into the moon, and another ‘J’ engraved into wolf’s fur.

“You’re the wolf,” he whispered, gathering that much from the ‘J’ on the wolf figure.

“Yeah,” Jared whispered back, before tracing the initial in the moon delicately with the tip of his finger. “You’re my moon, love. You’re my source of strength and sometimes, it feels like, the only one grounding me. You’re a part of me, you lead me home, and you’re always with me.”

“Jay…” Jensen choked back tears, and huffed an exasperated laugh when they fell anyway. He mopped at them with his palm. “Making your date cry isn’t supposed to happen till the sixth date.”

Jared laughed, but Jensen could see the unnatural shine that was present in his Alpha’s eyes.

“Yeah, well.” Jared chuckled thickly, gathering him close to his chest. “They should have put that in the dating manual.”

“I’ll be sure to write them a strongly worded letter about their incompetence,” he teased, snuggling in close. “I love you so much, Jay. Thank you for my gift. It’s amazing, and I love it.”

“I’m glad, baby,” Jared nuzzled his neck with a contented sigh. “Hey, boring and predictable, right?”

“Right,” he nodded against Jared’s chest. No freaky, spontaneous headaches. No images that shouldn’t be in my head, but are. “Normal, boring and predictable, Jay. We can do this for a few weeks.”

I can do this for a few weeks.
And he had. Granted, he had somehow caught a lucky break; in the past three weeks, he’d had no mind-numbing headaches, no crazy images, and no falling to the floor while writhing in pain. If he hadn’t felt that excruciating pain that afternoon, he would have been doubting if anything had even happened.

While he couldn’t play ignorant to himself, it helped his conscious that there had only been the single, isolated incident to date. It made the whole ordeal a little less terrifying, and a little more mildly concerning. He wasn’t naïve enough to dismiss it as a one-time thing, but he was hopeful that his reprieve would see out Jared’s birthday. After the party on Saturday, he would spill the beans. He just needed to get through the next two days at school, and his Alpha’s birthday on Saturday.

Three days- just three more days.

He hadn’t buried his head in the sand entirely, to his credit. As he scrubbed his body clean almost clinically, he thought about the little information he’d managed to gather from Jim Beaver…

~*Two weeks ago*~

“…permanently into human form, without any trace of the Were form?”

Jensen stopped dead in the doorway, his face coloring when he realized that he had walking in on his Chemistry professor’s discussion with another student. His face burned even hotter when he realized that Sandy was the one chatting to the elder alpha.

“I’m sorry, I just…”

“Oh!” Sandy turned bright red too, and seeing her flustered was such an uncommon thing for him, that Jensen forgot his own chagrin. “That’s okay…I’ll just go,” she stood up quickly, lifting her bag and all but scurrying out of the lab.

Jensen was torn between apologizing to her, and apologizing to Beaver. Since the beta was making fast tracks away from him, he shrugged, approaching Mr. Beaver instead.

“Sorry about that, Sir,” he offered sheepishly. “I didn’t know y’all were busy with a discussion.”

To his surprise, the normally surly professor didn’t ream him out. Quite the opposite, in fact, Jim aimed a faint smile at him.

Weird in itself, since a faint smile from Beaver was the equivalent of a full out beaming grin from a normal person.

“Don’t worry about it,” he waved a dismissive hand. “She was just curious about the Were-to-Human transition.”

His thoughts strayed immediately away from Sandy’s intentions. “Did you manage to make that concoction? The one that’s supposed to leech out the Were in her blood?”
The process, as Jim had explained to him before, was a complicated one. In order to turn a human into a Were, they had to be bitten just above the pulse point in their neck. The natural venom that’s secreted only from an Alpha’s incisors, enter the bloodstream and genetically modify the human DNA until they replicate to form Were DNA.

Similarly, to reverse the process, a serum needed to enter the bloodstream that had controlled amounts of silver nitrate in it. The silver needed to be infinitesimal, so that it would attack the Were DNA, but it wouldn’t kill the inhabitant. Jim had likened the whole process to paralysis, in which the Were DNA was essentially becoming paralyzed in the host, allowing only the human DNA to function, thus retarding all Wolf aspects and making them dormant inside the host.

From his own knowledge of Chemistry, Jensen knew how intricate the process had to be to create the serum, and he also had a fair idea of the kind of agony Katherine would soon be experiencing.

“I’ve managed to ascertain what quantities I need to be using,” Beaver’s answer pulled him from his thoughts, “but it will take about a month before it’s ready. Gotta wait on some of the herbal ingredients that’ll combat the effects of the chemicals in her body.”

“That’s good,” Jensen nodded absently, the barest inkling of a thought planting itself inside his mind. “Hey, do you think I could talk to her before y’all start the process? Just in case she doesn’t survive.”

“I’m sure the Alpha won’t mind, son,” Jim shrugged, “not after you helped him tear a hole into the Morgan pack this weekend.”

“Awesome,” he grinned, blushing lightly. “Mind if I ask you something, Sir?”

“I’m not a betting man, Jensen, but I’d wager you’re gonna ask me whether I mind or not,” Jim returned archly, his prickly response softened somewhat by the grudging affection in his eyes. “What’s on your mind, kid?”

No beating around the bush, then. “Jared’s prophetic dreams about me when I was kidnapped,” he stated baldly. “I was wondering; with that kind of…divination, how exactly would you know whether it was prophetic, or…well, something else entirely?”

Beaver sent him a calculating look, and it was only through years of being a hardened gang member, that Jensen managed to hold eye-contact without so much as a flinch. After a few moments, the older man crossed his desk, coming to stand in front of Jensen, arms folded over his chest.

“At the time,” he started, still looking guarded, “I was alerted to the possibility because of how personal Jared’s dreams were. He saw you, and felt the same type of agonizing pain he felt when you disappeared. A prophetic dream is easily distinguishable, because it’s a dream you’re experiencing first hand.”

At the answer, some of the tension in the artist’s shoulders immediately eased. One thing he knew for certain, was that he was an outsider looking into whatever had been in his mind that afternoon. He felt “his” chest being ripped open, without really feeling any pain in his chest. That meant, at least, that his vision wasn’t anything to do with Jared.

“Let’s say, hypothetically,” he added quickly, “that someone dreamt about something happening to someone that…wasn’t really them. Like, you’re watching something happen out of body?”

Jim relaxed visibly, and Jensen dared to hope.

“You’re talking about past life dreams,” Jim nodded slowly. “At least, that’s what it sounds like to me. Psychologists and dream analysts have been debating the possibilities of it for decades. It’s more
or less just the subconscious that’s trying to push past life memories into our awareness, with the intent of guiding us on our current life. If you were to believe in dream significance, then hypothetically,” Jim smirked as he stressed the word, “there’d be nothing for you to worry about.”

~ *Present*~

He hadn’t had the heart to tell Beaver that he wasn’t talking about past life dreams.

He had entertained the possibility of his vision being something from his past life, but it just didn’t fit for him. Not only did none of the images seem remotely familiar to him, but they all held an outer energy to them; some foreign emotion, as strange to him as the images themselves, that Jensen was cognizant of, but didn’t feel firsthand.

All he knew for sure, was that there was some kind of urgency to those images. Something he needed to know about them, from them, and none of it had to do with his subconscious rallying up memories of his soul’s past lives.

He hummed absently to himself as he wrapped a towel around his waist, toying with ideas in his mind. His instincts were emphatic, telling him that there was something he had to listen to; there was some puzzle to figure out, one that invariably would be the key to something going on at that moment.

What puzzle, though?

Jensen snorted to himself; he wasn’t even sure what the vision was. He could barely identify the strange images he saw, leave alone trying to decipher any hidden messages behind them.

The only thing he could do at the moment, was keep his eyes and ears open, and keep ironing out the last minute details for Jared’s birthday. After the party…well, then, he would just have to trust in his relationship with the Alpha, and be straight with him about what was going on.

“A kiss for your thoughts?”

Jensen jumped about a foot in the air as Jared’s voice materialized from his doorway. He grabbed at his towel with one hand, the other coming to rest upon his chest, where his heart was trying to beat out of his rib cage. His face flushed guiltily, as though Jared could have heard the thoughts running through his head, and he scowled as Jared smirked at his reaction.

“Fuck’s sake, Jared!” he griped breathlessly. “Make some fucking noise, will you?”

His Alpha chuckled unrepentantly, glancing quickly into the passage before darting inside and shutting his door. Jensen raised an eyebrow at him.

“Making sure your dad was still downstairs,” Jared grinned, his eyes darkening as they took in their fill of Jensen’s body.

Clad in only a fluffy white towel, Jensen squirmed underneath the scrutiny, serving only to broaden Jared’s predatory smile.

“I’m surprised he let you up here, considering I was in the shower,” Jensen commented, trying not to let himself get caught up in the arousal Jared’s very presence evoked in him. He did not want Eric to
walk in on him getting up-close-and-personal with Jared’s dick.

“I’m very charming, baby,” Jared informed him, a playful gleam entering his eyes. Jensen rolled his eyes.

“Modest too, obviously.”

Jared chuckled, and it seemed that mentioning his father had done its job, because Jared passed him, keeping his hands to himself, and flopped across Jensen’s bed, splaying himself over the covers and settling against the headboard, surrounded by pillows.

“Seriously though, baby,” Jared called out as he stuck his head into his wardrobe, looking for a pair of sweats and Jared’s hoodie. “What’s on your mind? You were worlds away when I came in.”

Jensen popped his head through the neck of the hoodie before answering. “Just thinking about my plans for the weekend,” he replied glibly, threading his arms through the sleeves. Not a lie, he consoled himself. Jared had yet to fess up about his birthday, and Jensen wondered whether his lover was ever going to tell him. Probably not, since Jared thought he was going to have to work for the whole day on Saturday.

“We still on for dinner on Saturday, right?” Jared asked, and Jensen hid a smirk at the worried undercurrent of the Alpha’s voice. It was heartwarming that Jared still wanted to spend as much time with him as possible, even thinking that Jensen didn’t know about his birthday.

“Of course, Jay. I should be finished at the club around 5, so we’ll have dinner at 7.”

“Cool. Swop those out,” Jared looked pointedly at the sweatpants in his hands, “for a pair of jeans. Let’s go to our clearing.”

“It’s a school night, and my dad’s home,” he pointed out, even as he pulled out a pair of worn blue jeans instead. “You want me to scale the drainpipe from my window, Romeo?”

Jared snorted. “Not necessary. Let’s chalk it up to your dad being wrapped around your finger, and you having a midnight curfew.”

Jensen grinned impishly. He quickly changed into his jeans, ignoring Jared’s teasing when he pulled his jeans on before unwrapping the towel from his waist.

“Nothing I haven’t already seen, baby,” Jared leered, eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Nothing you’re gonna see again, if you keep up your antics,” Jensen shot back.

Never let it be said that Jensen didn’t know exactly how to shut his Alpha down.

~*Jared*~

“…I tell you, Jen, it was crazy! I’ve never seen anyone move that fast before, except for maybe that time when Chad thought that they were giving out free hotdogs in the cafeteria. It was hilarious, baby, I mean…Jen?”

Jared paused in confusion as his mate stopped dead in his tracks. Jensen stood stationary at the mouth of the entrance to their clearing, and a smile crept on to the Alpha’s face when he realized that his
boyfriend was pleasantly speechless.

Without the fairy lights that had graced the beautiful enclosure the last time, the only illumination came from the blueish hue of moonlight and the soft glow of the stars shining down on them. The entire meadow was bathed in the unique lights of the night sky, casting a spell of ambiance over their little haven and weaving the perfect set-up for the couple.

Jensen didn’t stop gazing around in awe, even as Jared gently led him to the blanket he’d set out for them. For the first time in a long while, his beautiful mate’s face was devoid of the tension and concern it usually held. It had been worrying the Alpha; even the past few, relatively calm weeks, had seen Jensen on edge, as if he were waiting for the other shoe to drop. Jensen was trying to hide it, and he appreciated the protective reaction, but it was becoming more concerning to watch his lover run himself ragged trying to keep everything bottled up inside him.

His main mission tonight was to keep Jensen from worrying about the world around them, even just for the night. His mate deserved some time off, and if Jared had to engineer a night full of distractions to make sure he got it, well then that was just something he was going to do.

As he settled with Jensen on the blanket, he bit back a sigh at the thought of Saturday. His birthday was always fun for him, and he was one of those people that spent time ticking down the days to their birthday, but this year, all he could think about was how much he wanted to spend the whole day with Jensen. More accurately, he was thinking about how much he wanted to, but couldn’t.

Really, pretty much everything had worked against him. He hadn’t wanted to tell Jensen about the date to begin with, because he saw how much and how hard his boyfriend worked for money for college, and he refused to be the reason Jensen parted with his hard-earned green. Nobility aside, he realized that without Jen knowing, he had no legitimate reason to ask his mate to skip work and spend the day with him. Effectively, Jared had to settle for having dinner with his lover, and spending the whole day doing one of his mom’s ideas of a family lunch. Which more or less always amounted to a Padalecki family reunion- something he usually enjoyed, but also something that paled in comparison to uninterrupted time with his awesome mate. The family get-together was really just another reason not to tell Jensen about the significance of the date- Jen had been worried enough to meet his parents and Jeff and Megan. He wasn’t about to subject his mate to his whole family, and make him endure interrogations from well-meaning aunts, uncles and third cousins twice removed.

“You okay?”

Jared snapped out of his self-pity at his lover’s gentle enquiry. Jen was looking at him, eyebrow raised and concern in his eyes. Just the expression was enough to remove any trace of his petulance; he loved how much his mate cared, and how attuned he was to his feelings.

He stretched out next to Jensen, fitting his body around his mate’s easily. “I’m okay,” he confirmed. “I’ve missed being alone with you, baby.”

Jensen chuckled lightly, snuggling back against him almost automatically. He tightened his grip around the lithe body and relished in nuzzling the soft skin of his lover’s neck.

“We were alone just a couple days ago, when we took that long walk from the club,” he pointed out sensibly, even as his hand drifted down to grasp Jared’s.

“Ye-eah,” he drew the word out, pouting childishly. “But not like this. Just us, no people, no pressure.”

“You know normal couples have to deal with this kinda separation all the time?” Jensen asked, and
despite the amused glint in his eyes, Jared felt the tension that suddenly entered his muscles. “Grass is always greener, Jay.”

A cautionary feeling settled over the Alpha. The past three weeks had felt...off, to him. He knew Jensen better than anyone- at least, he liked to think so- and as much as he had loved three weeks free of drama and peril, it almost seemed like Jensen...didn’t.

Which was crazy. Jared knew it was crazy, because he knew that Jensen didn’t enjoy being in danger. He most certainly didn’t enjoy Jared being in danger.

What Jared couldn’t figure out, was why Jensen seemed to rebel so hard against the very notion of normal. As much as the word thrilled him, it caused equal tension in his pretty mate. Jensen might have thought he was hiding it, but Jared could read those green eyes like it was his favorite book. Which in a way, it was.

He inched impossibly forward, waiting until his own body heat dissolved some of Jensen’s tension. “Baby, are you okay?” He chose his words carefully. “It’s enough to say the word ‘normal’, and your back gets all tied up. What’s going on?”

A multitude of expressions crossed the artist’s face, replaced so quickly that Jared couldn’t catalogue them all. Finally, Jensen settled on sad resignation, accompanied by a small sigh.

“Do you wish that we were more normal?” Jensen asked, his voice smaller and more scared than Jared had ever heard it, inclusive of the times his brave mate faced armies of both human and Were. “Maybe if I were a werewolf, or even if I were a human without Shaman blood in me, maybe then you wouldn’t have been given such an uphill battle for your mate. Maybe if we were more of a normal couple, you wouldn’t have to spend so much time worrying, or fighting, or...oomph! Jay!”

Jared cut his mate off by rolling them over, pinning Jen against the blanket with his long and muscled body.

He had reacted instinctively; at his lover’s words, his heart had all but frozen in his chest. His breath was stolen from his lungs and equal parts panic and pain exploded inside of him.

Oh, God...How did Jensen ever think that?

“Baby...” he murmured, framing Jensen’s face and forcing fearful green eyes to meet his. He didn’t prop himself up, wanting Jensen to feel every bit of him pressing him down. “Jensen, how could you ever, even start to think that?” Leaning down, he captured Jensen’s lips in several soft, sucking kisses. He kept their lips within brushing distance as he talked. “You’re my mate, my Beta, the love of my life...”

“But you want normal, Jay,” Jensen whispered, biting his lip. Jared licked at the spot and Jensen obediently let go of his grip on his abused lower lip. “I want you to have what you want, but I just don’t think our relationship will ever really...”

“Stop.” He enunciated the word firmly, forcefully. “God, love, I’m sorry,” he breathed, “I’m so damn sorry if I ever made you think that I didn’t want us. Of course I do, baby, how could I not? You’re...God, you’re everything to me. By normal, I just mean that I want you to be safe, love. I want you in my arms and I want to never have to contemplate losing you...but I’d take all of that, all the worry and fear and uncertainty in the whole world, if the alternative was not having you. Even the thought of not having you in my life is more painful than anything I’ve ever felt.” He tenderly brushed at the lone tear that had escaped his lover’s long lashes. “Yeah, love, we’ve been given uphill since the word go. But all of it, is so worth it to get to spend my life with you! I don’t ever
want you to change, Jensen. You’re perfect to me; if you’d been Were, or if you weren’t part Shaman, then you wouldn’t have been you. And it’s you that I fell so deeply in love with, not because of chemistry or biology, but because of you. It’s true that my soul recognized you as mate before anything else, but love, you made it so easy for my heart to recognize it too.” He nuzzled his mate’s neck before adding in a low voice, “I consider myself as the luckiest Alpha in the world, to have a mate like you. I’d never want to trade what we have for anything in the world.”

“Not even for normal?” Finally, a small smile quirked his lover’s lips upwards, and to Jared, it was like the sun coming out.

He attacked Jensen’s lips without warning, plundering his mouth in a fast and dirty kiss. “Not for any single thing. You belong to me,” he growled possessively, pausing to press another hard kiss to his lover’s swelling lips. “You’re mine, baby.” His blood ran hot in his veins, just like it always did with the thrill of the knowledge that he could claim the amazing man as his. Grinding dirtily against his mate, he relocated his mouth to Jensen’s neck, sucking bruises all along his throat and collar bone, heedless of the poor placement; he wanted people to see it, he wanted Jensen to know that everyone saw Jared in every mark.

“Jared.” The breathy, broken moan did nothing but fuel his growing desire, and he growled against his lover’s sensitive skin. He relished in the way Jensen arched up into him, hands grasping to mold the perfect figure to his.

In a movement too quick for him to really be aware of, he pulled his hoodie off Jensen. Slowly and purposefully, he began to nibble down Jensen’s muscled torso, stopping to swirl his tongue teasingly over the artist’s pebbled nipples. Every keen and whimper he pulled from his responsive boyfriend was sent straight to his groin, and it took all his willpower to ignore his straining cock against his zipper. To be totally fair, though, the salty tang of Jensen’s skin on his tongue and the desperate little jerks of his mate’s hips, were both pretty awesome distractors.

He made quick work of the button on Jen’s jeans, pulling them down to his knees as he straddled his mate’s body. Smirking mischievously, he placed hot, open-mouthed kisses all over Jensen’s thighs, pointedly ignoring the man’s erection.

“Bastard,” Jensen huffed a breathless laugh, pushing up against Jared’s hands that were pinning his hips to the ground, to no avail. “Revenge is a bitch, Jay.”

Chuckling darkly, Jared had to wonder whether revenge would really be such a bad thing, but the Alpha was nothing if not a self-preservationist. He wisely kept that thought to himself.

Heeding his lover’s unspoken demand, he peeled Jensen’s boxers carefully off him, traversing his body with kisses as his hand slowly pumped his boyfriend’s hard length. As his mouth found a nipple, he curled his fingers into a loose fist, suckling Jensen’s hard nub relentlessly as the man jerked into his hand.

“Jar--Jay,” Jensen whimpered, helplessly bucking, his head thrown back in pleasure. His hands came up to grab Jared’s shoulders, his nails digging into the Alpha’s muscles. “Please, Jay…God, fuck, please…”

“Wish I could knot you, baby,” Jared growled, biting hard enough to bruise, but not pierce the skin of Jen’s pec. “Wish I could keep you here for hours, moving my cock inside your hole.”

“Please, fuck…”

Nearly losing his mind at his mate’s pretty begging, it took all his willpower to remember Jensen’s
Making a split moment decision, he flipped them around so that Jensen was on top of him. His boyfriend took full advantage of his new position, immediately ripping open Jared’s jeans and pulling them down with his boxers, rutting against him, skin on skin that pulled a guttural groan from the Alpha’s throat. Blindly searching, Jared growled in pleasure when his hands found Jensen’s ass. He groped at the taut globes, kneading as he gradually pulled them apart. Jensen gasped, surging down into a kiss as his hole was exposed to the cool air.

Jared flipped his tongue into the hot cavern of his mate’s mouth, rubbing over his furled entrance with one finger. That was all it took before Jensen exploded all over him, and it was only by sheer willpower that Jared managed to keep from doing the same.

Flipping them over again, he hooked Jensen’s legs over his shoulders and coated his fingers in his mate’s sticky come. Finding his hole again, Jared pushed his index finger in, effortlessly finding his prostate and rubbing insistently, ignoring Jensen’s whimpers at the overstimulation.

Despite the half-hearted protests, his boyfriend had great stamina, and before long, Jared was rutting their cocks together again, their needy sounds amalgamating into carnal groans of pleasure. Wriggling a second finger into his lover’s hole, Jared drifted his other hand down to grip their cocks together and strip them both.

“God, yes, Jay, harder,” Jensen moaned, reaching his own hand down to fondle Jared’s growing knot. His talented fingers were rubbing with just the right amount of pressure, and way too soon, Jared flew off the edge, ropes of come painting Jensen’s stomach white, with his mate following soon after.

The Alpha went boneless, retaining just enough sense to fall next to his mate. His breath was coming out in choppy pants, not unlike Jensen, and even in the wake of such sexual carnage, his lover’s hand found his, blindly grabbing on.

After a few minutes, feeling more secure in his own consciousness, Jared turned into the love of his life, taking off his outer shirt and sluggishly cleaning them both off. His wife-beater clung wetly to his back from his sweat, and the wind chilled the excess moisture, cooling off his overheated body.

He smiled as a small huff of laughter fell from Jensen’s lips. “What?”

“You only wanted alone time so that you could have your wicked way with me,” Jen snorted. “I’m laughing because I am way too fucking okay with that.”

###

Jared loved his family. Really, truly, he did. It was just that sometimes…

“Jared, honey!! How you’ve grown!! Why, the last time I saw you, you were in diapers! Now let me take a look at you…ooh, you’re still a little cutie!”

Sometimes they possessed the skills to drive him either to homicide or insanity, depending on the day.

Today was one of those times. And he was feeling pretty close to insane.

Jared stood patiently still as his great-aunt pinched his cheek. Actually pinched his God damned cheek. Like he was still a freaking pup. Half of him felt a little guilty for his thoughts, since she had come all the way to see him on his birthday, but the other part of him felt every bit as petulant as the toddler she was making him feel like. Finally, after a half hour interrogation about his studies and deflecting demands to meet his infamous mate, Jared escaped to his room, breathing a sigh of relief
Unlocking his phone, he scrolled through all his birthday messages until he got to the text Jensen had sent him this morning. For a moment, before he woke up, he thought it was a birthday wish from his mate, but he quickly reminded himself that Jensen had no idea what day it was. Even so, his mate’s text was still his favorite text from all of the texts he’d received that day. It simply read:

Morning, Jay! Hope I’m not waking you up; I’m just trying to balance the books before we start with inventory at the club. Fun times. I’ll see you at dinner, babe! I can’t wait! Love you!

He smiled dopily at the words. He wasn’t sure he would ever stop being grateful to whatever God had seen fit to give him someone as phenomenal as Jensen.

“Jare?”

Jared glanced up as his father knocked at his door. “Come on in, Dad,” he called out easily, pocketing his phone and smiling at the Padalecki pack Alpha as he walked in, closing the door behind him. After some deliberation, of which Jared himself had been a considerable part of, they’d decided that Gerald would continue to be the pack’s Alpha, at least for a couple of years. Jared wasn’t nearly ready for that responsibility, not yet, and he still needed to go to college. His father had made it clear to him that the title was ready for him the moment he chose to claim it, but Jared was more than happy to wait. He wanted to enjoy his life and his mate for a little while, before the responsibility of his pack’s welfare would fall to him officially.

And conveniently enough, it also gave his unsuspecting Beta time to deliberate on whether he would stay human or turn. Not that Jensen knew anything about that particular decision…but Jared figured he had some time to broach the idea. Maybe in a couple years.

“What’s up, Dad?” he asked, distracting himself from his guilty thoughts. “Am I already being missed?” He grimaced at the thought of going back down.

“No,” Gerald chuckled, amusement and pity showing in his eyes. “They’re on the catching up stage. I just wanted to check on you.”

Jared smiled reassuringly. “I’m okay,” he nodded. And just because he wasn’t above testing his dad on his newfound acceptance of his mate, he added, “I guess I’m just missing Jen.”

The Alpha didn’t miss a beat. “I’m guessing you didn’t mention to him it was your birthday?”

Jared was surprised that the blame hadn’t immediately been hinted towards Jensen, but the answer definitely lowered his guards. “I didn’t want him to worry about doing anything big for me.”

“What if he thinks it was because you didn’t want to introduce him to the family?” his father asked curiously.

The possibility hit him like a freight train. “It’s not like that, I just didn’t want to overwhelm him.” Jared instantly went on the defensive. “Jensen’ll understand!”

His father held up a placatory palm. “Okay, I’m sorry. I’m just worried that you might be hiding behind excuses because you don’t want to face the dilemma of changing or not changing your Beta.” His silence was answer enough. “I thought so.”

Jared deflated from his self-righteous anger. “What am I supposed to do?” he asked tiredly. “Things have just calmed down for us. I can’t dump this on him now.”
“That’s the thing though, son,” his father’s voice sounded softer than he’d heard in a while. “An Alpha’s Beta…they’re stronger than we’re capable of even realizing.” Gerald chuckled. “Your mother proves that to me every day. I had to learn to trust that every hitch in the road wouldn’t send her running…you need to learn the same thing. Trust your mate to be your mate. It will make everything a lot easier on the both you, especially once he realizes the same thing about you.”

Jared blinked at the logic. Right there, he decided to trust in his mate and their bond, and tell Jensen about everything after their dinner that night. In retrospect, he felt a little immature for having not seen it that way before. “You couldn’t have had this talk with me two weeks ago?” he asked petulantly. Despite his words, Jared felt infinitely grateful that his father was around to give the advice; he never realized how much he counted on his father’s counsel until he hadn't had it, and he was so much happier now that things had been resolved between them, and he once again had his mentor and hero in his corner and on his side.

His father laughed. “Come on, Jare,” he nodded towards the door, ignoring his grumbles. “You have several other aunts who want to pinch those darling cheeks of yours.”

“How,” he grumbled, even as he got up, “am I ever supposed to have a reputation as a badass Alpha, with our family around?”

“I wouldn’t feel too bad, son,” Gerald shrugged. “After all, it takes a whole different kind of strength to survive a Padalecki family get-together.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Next is Jared's party, and we'll start to get some answers to the questions I know y'all are asking!!

Hope y'all enjoyed! Much love! <3
Birthday surprises

Chapter Notes

First of all, Happy New Year all my wonderful readers!!! May 2016 be prosperous and kind to you, and may the best of your 2015 become the worst of your 2016!!

I just want to say again how thankful I am to have all of you reading and enjoying my work!! Much love to you all!

For frostedgoddess, my no 1 fan and truly great friend.
For Gddssgrl, whose character analyses made my heart so happy.
And for unicornofrainbow, who I hope makes a speedy recovery!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*Jensen*~

After three weeks of careful planning and taking painstaking measures to make sure Jared would be in the dark, everything was ready.

And perfect.

Sherry Padalecki had been in his corner from the get-go, and that had been an incredible help. She hadn’t wanted to get involved with the planning much, since it was his idea to begin with, but she had done most of the legwork making sure that Jared wouldn’t find out about the party. She had even given the Alpha a list of errands to run so that they could get to the club without him seeing, and Jensen had recruited Chad to get Jared to the club without tipping him off to anything.

Eric had given him the car for the evening, and he had hidden the painting in the trunk, not wanting anyone else to get a glimpse of the personal work. The band was ready and Chris had sorted out his music, and all Jared’s friends, his immediate family, and close pack members were all present.

Jensen would be damned if he allowed anything to go wrong tonight.

His phone vibrated against his thigh and he grinned at the message Chad had sent him. “Okay everyone,” he called out, after taking a deep, cleansing breath. “Jared’ll be here in five minutes. Are we all ready?”

He received several variations of the same positive answer, and for the first time since that morning, he allowed himself to relax.

Now, just the big surprise.

~*Jared*~
“Chad, you’re my boy, but I’m gonna kick your ass ten times till Tuesday.”

Jared glared at his best friend as he loped towards him, shit-eating grin firmly in place. His patience had been tried the entire day; after enduring all the relatives and remarks about how tall he’d gotten—what? Did they expect him not to grow in five years?- his mother, an hour before he was supposed to meet Jensen, had given him a list of things to get for her from the store. He knew it would take him at least a half hour to get his mom’s errands done, so he’d dressed in his slacks, shirt and sports jacket before he left. Thankfully, nothing at the store had spilled on his nice clothes, but thanks to Murphy’s Law, there was construction on the road, and he was delayed by 15 minutes.

By the time he got home, already five minutes late to fetch Jen from the club, his family had already left. His parents and Megan were taking the few relatives that were staying the night, out for dinner, and he realized too late that Chad had swiped his spare set of keys a couple days ago, in case he needed a place to crash because he was out past curfew with his newest fling.

Now he was twenty minutes late to fetch his mate, he was locked out of his own house, and Chad was fucking sauntering towards him.

“Cool it, Jay-Pad,” Chad waved his hand dismissively. “I was on the phone with Denise.” He smirked. “I’m meeting her at the club in ten, so you gotta give me a ride, bitch.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jared grumbled, snatching the keys from his best friend’s hands, “I’ll drag you there from my tow bar.”

“Why you gotta bitch so much?” Chad complained, even as he grinned at him. “You should be in a good mood! Birthday sex is the fucking best! Oh…wait…” Chad elbowed him mockingly, “you didn’t tell your mate it’s your birthday! You’re screwed, man,” he snorted.

Jared scowled, wordlessly dumping the groceries on the kitchen table and begrudgingly taking an extra minute to pack the perishables into the fridge. Chad kept irking him, and he kept ignoring him, hoping against hope that Jensen wasn’t the type who held grudges over punctuality. On the drive over, he found himself relaxing marginally; just knowing that he was about to see his mate was enough to quell his bad mood.

Pulling up at the club, though, all his senses were jacked up to high alert. The only smell hitting his nose was a citrusy scent; oranges, and cinnamon, and cloves; and the powerful odor pervaded his superior sense of smell. The combination was largely known to be the perfect scent masker, because of how powerful and long-lasting it was, and he had to wonder who felt the need to mask scents from him.

It could only mean trouble.

Before Chad was even out of the truck, he was in motion, running towards the entrance. He didn’t care for his own safety just then; the only thing he could think about, was his helpless mate inside the club, trapped with God knows who, and facing dangers that Jared was completely in the dark about.

He burst through the doors. “Jen!” he yelled out breathlessly, fear pounding his heart in a jagged, disjointed rhythm.

The several answering yelps and the few faintly mumbled ‘Happy birthday’ wishes, confused him to no extent.

And then Jensen was in front of him, laughing breathlessly.

“Calm down, Jay, it’s okay,” Jen bit his lip, hiding his guilty smile. “It’s a surprise party, we’re all
fine. I’m okay.”

Surprise party?

“You mentioned your birthday in Chemistry, when we first met,” his mate added, finally letting his smile show. Familiar arms threaded around him, and everything finally sank in.

His face burned bright red. “I smelled the scent blockers and thought you were in trouble,” he explained, a rueful smile quirking his lips up. “I never… I mean, how… when…”

“Your mate planned this all by himself,” his mom suddenly appeared behind Jensen, eyes twinkling as she smiled at him.

He looked down at Jensen who was smiling bashfully into his chest. “Three weeks of keeping things from you was hell,” he groaned, making everyone laugh.

If he’d been any less touched, Jared might have found it in him to be mortified at his leap to conclusions, but all he could feel was intense love and adoration for his mate. Now that he was calmer, he could appreciate the subtle décor around the club and the presence of everyone he was close to. He recognized the soft music playing as his favorite Bryan Adams song, and mouth-watering smells filled the air. Everything was ideal for him, on a level only his mate could have reached; it was close and intimate, without being isolated to family. It was casual, without being juvenile. It was special and thoughtful, without being ostentatious and impersonal.

It was perfect, and his mate had done it all alone, all for him.

He dipped his head to where his mate was resting his cheek against his chest. “I can’t believe you did this,” he murmured into Jensen’s ear, ignoring everyone else. He huffed an incredulous laugh. “I can’t believe you even remembered my birthday!”

“I’m still mad at you for not telling me, mister.” The twinkle in his mate’s green eyes and the beaming smile that he was treated to, belied Jensen’s words. “But of course I remembered. It was you.”

“Jesus, you’re incredible,” he breathed, pressing his lips to his lover’s temple.

“Hey, I totally lured your stubborn ass here,” Chad called out teasingly. “Where’s my adoring smooch?”

Jared thought it was worth their mothers’ reprimands, for Chad’s horrified face when Jared began to chase after him, smacking his lips ridiculously.

~*Jensen*~

“I’ll be right back,” Jensen promised with a grin as he backed away from the group of Jared’s cousins, vibrating phone in hand. Among various protests and a wink from Jared, Jensen walked to a relatively quiet corner, holding the phone to his ear, not bothering to check the caller ID. “Yo.”

“JR,” Aldis’ voice came through the small speaker. “What’s happening, Kid?”

“We’re all doin just fine, J-Ross,” his old friend assured him. “You’re the one we’re worried about.”

“Why?” he asked, his guard shooting up instantly. “Is there something you know that I need to know, but somehow don’t yet?”

“Calm down, JR.” Hodge’s authoritative voice reminded him of a couple years ago, when they were just starting to train him to survive on the streets. At first, the tone had made him bristle, but he had quickly realized that Aldis was simply stern because he wanted to make sure Jensen kept himself safe. Now, he quickly complied, knowing that the bar owner wouldn’t hesitate to hold back information if he thought Jensen couldn’t handle it.

“I’m calm,” he replied, his voice tight and controlled. “But you gotta keep me informed here, man. ‘Specially since I get the feeling that I’m compromised.”

He waited with bated breath as his friend went quiet. It was obvious that Dodge was contemplating his options, and Jensen didn’t want to aggravate his own case with his friend by snapping, so he bit his tongue.

Finally, Aldis spoke again. “I ain’t sure, but I’ve been hearing whispers.”

“Whispers about?”

“That asshole Adam tracking you down and coming to get you back.”

Jensen’s breath caught in his lungs at the mention of his abusive ex-boyfriend. Instinctive fear made his face and neck clammy and his breathing quickened a shade of a pace.

“How?” he asked in a shaky whisper. “How’d he know where to find me?”

“That don’t matter,” Aldis stated firmly. “We’re gonna have a real friendly talk with him here. Gently encourage him to leave you the fuck alone.”

Oddly enough, the words calmed him. He always hated everyone picking his battles for him, but in this case, he was grateful for the help. Frankly, he didn’t want any part of his past colliding with his future with Jared, least of all Adam.

“Keep me posted, yeah?”

“Will do,” his friend reassured him. “Until I do…stay close to the White Bread, huh? The boy looks like he couldn’t throw a punch to knock out a fairy, but I get the feeling he was playing it down with us. I think he can be dangerous when he needs to be. And he’s protective as hell towards you; he’ll keep you safe.”

Just the mention of Jared calmed him down immediately and an involuntary smile found its way to his face. The truth in Hodge’s words wasn’t lost on him; he knew that comparatively, Jared was the most dangerous predator of them all. There was no safer place for him than with his mate, and although he was sad he had to be the one to destroy Jared’s normal-time, he also knew that it was time to bring his Alpha up to speed with the real world.

“I’ll stay close to him,” he promised solemnly. “I’ll be okay as long as I’m with Jared.”

“Funny enough, I don’t doubt that, JR.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Al,” he thanked his friend. “Call me if there’s any update on him.” After a quick goodbye, he hung up, breathing a tired sigh through his teeth. It was easy to make the decision
to push his worries about Adam to the back of his mind, to become tomorrow’s problem; things were going great, for once, without a hitch in sight or mind. He’d had to turn up the charm for Jared’s relatives, but it was worth it for how much happier and less stressed Jared had gotten once they were all getting along. The food was great, Jared loved the band, and everyone was mingling effortlessly, coming together despite everyone’s differences over the past few weeks, to celebrate their future Alpha’s birthday.

He was not going to allow Adam Gilligan to be the reason that this evening he worked three weeks towards, would be ruined. He would tell Jared everything tomorrow morning.

He watched his Alpha interact with various guests, finding a calm Zen by watching him. With every amazed smile on Jared’s face and every twinkle that shone from hazel eyes, a bit of Jensen’s stress and tension melted away.

The only thing he was going to worry about tonight, was the song.

Jensen had practiced with Chris and the band, so his nerves were less about performance, and more about Jared’s reaction. Although the lyrics spoke to him and told the most accurate story of their love, he wasn’t sure that Jared would see it the same. Would he appreciate the gesture that spoke of who Jensen belonged to, or would he be embarrassed at their relationship being put on display like that?

On the one hand, the perpetual bruises on his skin from Jared’s lips and fingers said a lot about how the Alpha felt about possession. On the other hand, his family was here, and they’d just met him… what if Jared thought it was over the top? What if…

“Ah! Fuck!” Jensen yelped as Chris pinched his ribs hard, taking him away from his thoughts.

“What the hell was that for?” he griped, rubbing the throbbing spot.

“You’re overthinking things again,” Kane shrugged casually. “I’m stopping you.”

Jensen scowled, looking down at the floor. “I’m not overthinking,” he denied childishly, not wanting to admit his gratitude. “You’re overthinking,” he mumbled lamely.

Chris smiled at him, not the cocky smirk he was expecting, but the tender, big-brother grin that made him feel like things would be okay because he had his back-up in Kane. Predictably, a sense of calm settled over him, and he shoved his hands in his pockets sheepishly.

“You don’t think he’ll be upset that I’m openly broadcasting our relationship, do you?” he asked tentatively.

Chris snorted outright. “Are we talking about the same Jared? The one that wanted to announce your relationship on the PA system in school when Jason Momoa asked you out last week? That Jared?”

“That’s different,” he defended, even as he grinned at the memory. Jared had spent the better part of three days trying to convince him a public announcement was a good idea, since it would prevent him from having to kill a percentage of the student population. “His family is here, and…”

“…and they’ve all been ragging on him for not introducing you sooner,” Chris interrupted. “They love you, and all they’re gonna think about this, is why their mates didn’t do it for them.”

Jensen nodded, feeling the reassurance that could only come from an older brother soothe the butterflies that were wreaking havoc on his intestines.

“Listen,” he clapped his best friend’s shoulder, “I’m just gonna go to the backroom and make sure
the caterer is ready to serve after the song.”

Chris nodded the affirmative, ruffling his hair playfully before moving to join Sofia, Danni, Gen and Tom. Jensen caught Jared’s eye, signaling his destination to him as well. His mate nodded with a grin, and Jensen read a hastily mouthed ‘come back soon’ before another cousin was pulling the Alpha to the snacks table.

Smiling to himself, Jensen weaved through the crowd, stopping to make occasional conversation before moving on again. It was a relief to get to the backroom; it was much quieter than outside, and thanks to the open back door, a lot cooler too.

“Jamie?” he called out, peering into one of the pots and wondering whether the man had slipped outside for a smoke. “You out there man?”

He had barely taken a step before his legs gave out underneath him.

Jensen hit the floor hard, clutching his head in agony. White bursts of pain were streaking through his head, from just behind his eye all the way back to the base of his skull. He was aware of terrible gasping sounds saturating the air, and it took a moment before he realized that he was the one making them. Hands were grasping at him, and he couldn’t tell who it was, but he tried to hold on, hoping against hope that whoever it was could stop the awful pain.

Just like it did three weeks ago, unfamiliar images assaulted the back of his eyelids.

Darkness.

Howling winds nearly bending the trees around him.

The feel of crunchy soil against his palm.

Jeering and taunts filling the still air around him.

Ripping pain.

Black hair.

Can’t breathe.

Can’t breathe.

Can’t breathe…

“Jensen!!”

Like a drowning man, Jensen shot up, desperately gasping in greedy gulps of air and spluttering and choking. His hands scrabbled to find his chest, and once again, he could hardly believe his skin was whole beneath his palm. Tears stung the back of his eyes and tied his throat up.

What was happening with him?

“Jensen, oh God, are you okay? What the hell was that? What happened? I’m calling an ambulance.”

He forced himself to turn in the direction of Jamie’s voice, seeing the man reach for his cell.

“Jamie, don’t,” he requested gruffly, his hand shooting out, grasping tighter than he intended to. “I’m okay, I just…I got light-headed.”
“You were on the floor and struggling to take in a breath when I came in,” the caterer glared disbelievingly at him. “That’s a little more than a temporary dizzy spell.”

“Panic attack,” he explained a little too quickly. “I’m singing a song for my boyfriend. Just some stage fright, I guess. I’m sorry if I scared you.”

Jamie eyed him dubiously, eyes roving over him as though he were trying to determine whether Jensen was going to keel over.

He endured the inspection with forced patience, wondering what about those images were giving him pause this time. They were the same as the last vision…

Black hair.

The realization hit him quickly, making him blink. That was different. He hadn’t seen hair in the first vision. Also, something about those locks were familiar to him, in a way. He had seen them before…

There was also the breathing thing; he could breathe just fine the last time, but now, it had felt like he was drowning in himself.

It was like the visions were getting more intense, but he still couldn’t pin point any rhyme or rhythm to any of them. Like before, he was filled with a sense of urgency, as if whatever was happening was pertinent to him somehow.

“You’ve got a cut on your hand,” Jamie announced. By the tone of his voice, Jensen knew the chef was letting things slide, and he was irrationally grateful that Jared was still going to have the rest of the night before returning to the drama that was their life.

Jensen grabbed a paper towel, wrapping it around his bleeding palm. For the life of him, he couldn’t remember cutting it, and yet the shallow cut dripped sluggishly with ruby red blood…

Jensen froze where he stood, mouth half opened as he stared at his cut palm.

Blood.

Blood was the answer. Or, well, part of it, at least.

Specifically, shaman blood.

His visions were some kind of message to him. Was it Rosen? Was his ancestor trying to tell him something? Warn him about something? Was it someone else entirely?

Jensen felt like an idiot for not realizing it before, although granted, the knowledge wasn’t overly helpful in itself. All it really did, was convince him he wasn’t crazy, and he was already about 78 percent sure of that before.

Even so, it was a tiny step closer than he was a few weeks ago.

“Freckles!” Chris yelled, smashing through the door, making him jerk ridiculously in shock. Chris didn’t notice and Jensen tried to regulate his breathing so that the alpha wouldn’t pick up on his irrational scare. “You’re needed on stage.”

Jensen rolled his eyes, avoiding Jamie’s gaze. “Use your inside voice, Kane,” he griped, his voice only slightly breathless, straightening his jacket. ‘I’m comin’. Jamie, you all good here?”

Though he had only been working with the man since the club started up, Jensen was pleased with
the loyalty his friend afforded him. Jamie kept his mouth shut even as he shot a concerned look at the artist.

He grinned reassuringly at the worried man, pushing all the drama to the back of his mind.

No more visions, no more Adam, no more hidden messages. Just the song.

Just the song.

~*Jared*~

“Jared!”

Turning at the sound of his name being called, the Alpha grinned widely at the blonde approaching him.

“Katie!” he grabbed his cousin in a bear hug. “It’s been a while, kiddo. Have you met…”

“Your mate?” the smaller girl finished, rolling her eyes affectionately. “Yeah, I’ve met him. No thanks to you! Chad introduced us earlier.”

“I’m sorry,” the Padalecki heir apologized sheepishly. “Things got a little crazy trying to mingle with everyone here.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Katie waved him off impatiently. “The important thing is that you tell me the wedding date as soon as possible so that I can find a cute dress.”

Jared chuckled at the smaller girl’s enthusiastic hand motions, trying to tamp down on the butterflies that flooded his insides at the very notion. “I take it you like him then, Kit-Kat.” His chest puffed with pride.

“He’s absolutely amazing, cuz,” Katie gushed, clapping her hands. “Where is he?”

“Just getting some stuff from the backroom.”

“Great!” Katie fixed him with a curious look. “So when are you going to turn him? The rest of us are all dying to know.”

Jared spluttered slightly. He had forgotten just how much of a straight shooter his little cousin was. “Ever think about getting into law, Kid?”

“I’d make a kickass prosecutor,” she agreed easily, flicking a curl back with her finger. “But seriously. Why wouldn’t you want to change him? I thought mating was supposed to make someone all truly madly deeply over their soul mate.”

“I’m truly madly deeply for Jen,” Jared defended, even as he felt ridiculous for saying those words.

“Then why wouldn’t you want to spend an eternity with him?” Katie countered.

Sighing cavernously, the Alpha rubbed his palm against the nape of his neck. “It’s more complicated than that,” he offered weakly.
His cousin shot him a sympathetic look, palming one of the candies from the table where Jensen had spread them out in decoration, and popping it in her mouth. “It’s not complicated to the rest of the pack,” she pointed out gently. “To them, it’s a sign that you’re not taking him seriously.”

“I take him seriously!” Jared’s voice went up a pitch or two. “And I’m gonna give him the option to change. I’m gonna talk to him about it…”

“When?” Katie interrupted. “When some alpha asshole tries to hit on him because even the mating bite isn’t on him yet?”

Jared let out a growl at the idea of someone touching what was his. Jensen belonged to him, and only him, whether there was a mating bite, a turning bite, a wedding ring, or none of the above.

“Jen is mine,” he stated quietly, channeling his Alpha timbre into the statement. “And God or Lucifer help the one who tries to take him away from me.”

His cousin seemed strangely satisfied with his answer, smirking slightly as she flicked her head towards the stage. “Well, lover boy seems to feel the same way if it helps.”

“Happy birthday, Jay.”

Jared turned at the sound of his mate’s voice over the sound system. Jensen was smiling at him from the stage, the love evident even over the distance between them, and Jared grinned brilliantly back, feeling all of his tension drain immediately.

He may have been the proverbial guest of honor tonight, but his mate looked an otherworldly kind of beautiful. Jensen was dressed in dark black jeans, the kind that almost looked like slacks at first glance, with a bottle green V-neck that clung to his lightly muscled upper body and accentuated his shining emerald eyes. His customary black leather jacket completed the ensemble and his dirty blonde hair was carefully mussed into soft spikes, making him look like he belonged on a runway instead of an Eighteen-and-under club stage. The lights made him look a little pale, though, and Jared had to bat away the knee-jerk concern that filled his body.

“Thanks, baby,” he called out, making some people laugh quietly. “Where’s my birthday gift?”

“This is it, smartass,” Jensen shot back easily, and Jared chuckled at his pretty mate’s attitude, along with the crowd. “And by this,” Jen continued with a sly grin, “I don’t mean the party.”

Confusion settled over Jared along with childlike excitement; there was another present?

Without a word, Jensen stepped back, fitting the mike on to its stand. All at once, Jared realized what his present was going to be, and a low gasp fell from his lips. Heat shot through his veins and his Alpha roared with glee and happy possession as Jensen began to sing a song that showed everyone he was Jared’s.

“I used to think that I was so ice cool
That I could make my heart’s own rule
Nothing could get to me…
And you made it easy.”

Jared laughed through the heat that was filling his body. The lyrics rang true as he remembered the Jensen that had walked into school that first day; eager to blend in and quick to shoot him down. In retrospect, though, Jared could see that he’d gotten to Jensen’s heart a lot easier than most people.

“And now, my head, my heart and my reason
They say the same, and now, I believe them
You own a piece of me
And I gave it willingly.

Loving you, is like breathing air to me
It’s what my body does so naturally
Don’t matter if my life gets hard
‘Coz you make it easy for me to love you.”

The Alpha’s heart squeezed at the sincerity that resounded in his mate’s voice. Without asking, he knew that Jensen was also thinking about all the things they had gone through up until that point; all the forces that conspired against them, and yet here they stood. Jared felt like crying at the knowledge that even through all that pain, Jensen had found ease in loving him.

“I’m lost, I’m found, I’m breaking down slowly
I tried to hide, but somehow, you know me
I’m where I need to be…
And you make it easy.

Loving you, is like breathing air to me
It’s what my body does so naturally
Don’t matter if my life gets hard
‘Coz you make it easy for me to love you.”

His Alpha was all but roaring with the feelings of possessiveness that were searing his veins. The euphoria of his Beta’s blatant display of belonging was addictive, and he couldn’t wait to thank his beautiful mate for the best birthday gift he’d received thus far.

He forced himself not to jump Jensen, focusing on the mind-blowing sound of his lover’s voice and enjoying the lyrics instead. Shivers broke out over his skin as the tenor of Jensen’s smooth, deep voice seemed to connect with the innermost cords in his heart. At the same time that he wanted to climb a mountain and scream for all to hear that Jensen was his, he also thought he could happily fall to his knees in reverence of the love that he had found in his artist mate. At the same time that he thought his cheeks would split from his smiles, he thought that if he allowed his tears to spill, they would never stop. He knew that the force of his love for his Jensen was what made him feel so full of contradicting opposites.

It had been a beautiful change to watch, seeing Jensen become lost in the words he was singing to Jared, and only Jared, and the reverse was just as endearing. As the last chorus tapered off, Jensen became aware of the crowd again, visibly shrinking into himself self-consciously. Jared ignored all the cheering and fawning, cutting effortlessly through his friends and family to get to his mate.

Gathering the lithe form in his arms, the Alpha didn’t hesitate to swoop down and claim his lover’s lips in a bruising kiss, all heat and possession and desire. Pulling Jensen even tighter against his body, as though trying to make them a single person, Jared dominated his Beta without smothering him, in that moment finally understanding the distinction between a beta and a Beta. A Beta was an Alpha’s equal in a way that betas never were to any alpha. It was more obvious than ever that Jensen was going to rule the pack next to him, and judging from the continued noise of the crowd, everyone who was pack knew it too.

“Behave,” his mate gasped out against his lips when Jared let them up for a second, for air. The Alpha smirked, but relented to his Beta’s unspoken request; after seeing his dad grovel to his mom, Jared had vowed once never to test his future mate.
As if sensing Jensen’s bashfulness, nobody bombarded him as he came off stage. Running like a well-oiled machine, food began being served mere minutes after Jen’s performance, and in between eating and going to get food, people came over to fawn at his mate’s singing talents, and how sweet what he did for Jared was. Pride filled the Alpha and he made sure to stay close and keep a proprietary arm around his lover; public displays aside, there were never too many ways to show people who Jensen belonged to.

As always, Jensen indulged him, and as the night progressed his mate didn’t leave his side for longer than a few brief moments. Jared was pretty certain that the close proximity was the only thing that was keeping him from jumping Jensen right there and then.

Jared danced with his friends and his family, and above all, he danced with his mate, and only growled four times when Jensen was stolen from him by his cousin for a song. There was laughter and smiles and teasing and jokes, happiness that had been missing from their lives for a long time. One by one, his guests reluctantly and slowly trickled out, none of them leaving without extended goodbyes and gushing compliments about how fun the night had been.

Jared’s Alpha did a lot of preening.

Finally, a little after 3am, the last of their friends left, leaving Jared alone with his mate. Before he could pounce (literally) Jensen stopped him by raising a single, tired hand.

“You still have presents,” his lover grinned at him, and even through the fatigue in his eyes, Jensen managed a sparkle.

“There’s only one thing I want to be unwrapping right now,” the Alpha stated huskily, stalking his mate like prey, dark desire blowing his pupils wide. Jen laughed throatily.

“They’re presents from me, Jay,” his boyfriend added, a slight pout in his voice. “I want to give them to you before 8am.”

A puzzled frown graced his angular face. “Why 8am?”

“Because it’s still your birthday till 8am,” Jensen answered matter-of-factly. “Your mom said you were born at 8am. That means your birthday started at 8 this morning, which is when I sent you that birthday message, until the next five hours are up.”

Jared blinked owlishly for a moment before bursting into laughter.

He couldn’t really argue that logic, and he knew he didn’t stand a chance even if he wanted to.

He was actually pretty okay with that.

~*Jensen*~

Jensen led his boyfriend to the car, his tiredness quickly being replaced by excitement. He had spent three weeks planning everything, and the hardest part had gone off without a hitch. Now was the fun part.

“This is more of a promise I once made you,” he informed Jared casually, trying to mask the nerves that had settled in his belly. “But I thought it would be fitting to give it to you now.”
He pulled the painting out of the backseat, handing it over face-down, skipping the flourish and the antics in his anxiety. He watched as Jared’s slanted eyes took in the meadow in all its moonlit glory, the shadowing of the Jared-Wolf’s profile in the background and the dominant Jay Star.

For the first time in his life, Jensen understood the silence that his mate had lapsed into. Not from distaste or upset, but from awe. He still couldn’t fathom deserving that reaction, but if anything, Jared’s love had shown him how to recognize appreciation.

“I’m glad you like it,” he murmured with a small smile, something squeezing his heart in a vice grip when his mate looked up, tears in his hazel eyes. Wordlessly, the Alpha pulled him into a tight embrace, lips brushing over the nape of his neck almost reverently.

“I love it,” Jared corrected softly. “And if I was a good boyfriend, I’d tell you to use this in your profile for college applications. But I’m a selfish bastard and I want this in my room so that I see it every time I open my eyes in the morning, and every night before I close them.”

“Damn it, Jared, how do you always know exactly how to make me feel like I’m living the best dream in the world?”

Jared smiled softly. “You make it easy for me to love you, baby.”

Grinning at the direct quote, he pulled out the second item in the backseat. He dangled it in front of his boyfriend’s eyes, his smile turning wicked at the confusion that entered his Alpha’s face.

“Orange, cinnamon and clove infused blindfold,” he explained triumphantly. “Complete with ear plugs. You aren’t gonna see, hear or smell anything before I show you your next present.”

To his bemusement, Jared’s smile dimmed. “What’s wrong, Jay?” he asked gently, when the Alpha hesitated.

“Another gift, baby?” Jared asked, a small furrow appearing between his brows. “I can’t imagine how much time it took you to paint this, leave alone the time, energy and money I know you put into planning a surprise party for me. Putting more time and money into another gift…”

“I wanted to,” he interrupted quietly, firmly. “Everything I did, I wanted to do for you. Because I love you. I don’t remind you enough of that,” he smiled lightly, “and this is my chance to do that.”

Jared kissed him into breathlessness. “I know you love me,” the Alpha smiled against his lips. “You tell me so every time you smile at me, or hug me, or kiss me.”

Jensen ran his fingers through Jared’s locks, nails scraping lightly against his skull. “I forget that you can read me like a favorite book,” he teased affectionately, “but even so. Let me spoil you the way you spoil me every other day.”

Jensen knew Jared wouldn’t protest this time, and with utmost care, he tied the blindfold around his lover’s eyes. He led Jared into the passenger seat before crossing the car and getting in himself, but before he could turn the key in the ignition, Jared’s hand fumbled blindly for his.

He grasped his mate’s hand and Jared squeezed lightly. “You know it goes both ways, right Jen?”

“What does, Jay?” he asked in puzzlement.

“You make me feel every day like I’m living the best dream in the world, love.”
Being deprived of his senses was more disconcerting that he expected it to be. As though he could sense this, Jensen kept their hands intertwined, and the Alpha was thankful for his mate’s unspoken insight.

Although he tried instinctively to keep track of where they were going, it soon proved impossible when Jensen deliberately took twisting turns designed to mislead him. Whatever his mate was planning was big enough for him to take the extra time; if not for that, the excitement pulsing over their mating bond in spades would be enough for Jared to realize that Jensen was particularly eager about this present.

When the car finally stopped, the Alpha conceded to being led out; he trusted his mate implicitly, and knew that Jensen would never let him hurt himself. In response to Jensen’s emotions, his own enthusiasm grew, and he was practically bouncing on his toes by the time Jensen murmured a soft command in his ear to stop.

Jensen took a deep breath and pressed something into his hands. His fingers curled automatically around cool metal and pressed against the grooves, tracing over the indentations before realizing what he was holding.

Keys?

Keys to what?

“Take off the blindfold, Jay.”

His mate’s voice, breathy with anxiety, was the only sound to permeate the silence. His palms tingled with anticipation, and he pulled at the silk knot.

It slid away easily to reveal the gleaming planes of a car that defined his childhood.

The Impala shone, all sleek black, no hint of the rusting that once dotted its body. It looked better than when it was still running. The moonlight hit off the shiny black metal until it looked like it was sparkling and every inch was polished and buffed and shined to perfection.

Jared felt his stomach bottom out as a soundless gasp left his lips. His knees became weak and he battled to comprehend what he knew his eyes were seeing. The Alpha walked towards the beautiful car, mesmerized and entranced, brushing the tips of his fingers almost disbelievingly against the cool metal. A lifetime of memories flashed in his mind; memories of being a child and his Alpha grandfather soothing the bad dreams away, or patiently teaching him lessons he would never forget. The hours that were spent in the Impala that he had always thought of as his…

…but it wasn’t only the past that was bombarding his mind. It was thoughts of the future, too. Road trips with his beautiful mate by his side. Days spent just driving, existing outside of everything else in the car that was so much more than a home outside of home.

Maybe, someday, a son or daughter, to pass on his own wisdom to, like his grandfather had with him.

A dull roaring entered his ears as he fought to form words. Coherency seemed to be a vague and distant idea at this point; tears were rolling from his eyes in a continuous stream as his emotions got the better of him. He didn’t think that any amount of words, strung together in any amount of orders,
could possibly encompass everything he was feeling at that moment.

“Jen, baby…” he breathed, his voice choked. “How?”

“I have a lot of contacts,” Jensen answered softly from behind him. “Why don’t you get behind the wheel? Turn the key?”

Jared’s heart raced. Obviously, he was overthinking things, because Jensen couldn’t possibly mean what he thought those words meant. There was no way; a mechanic had assured them that extensive and complicated work would be required to even think of it running again; the labor would have cost more than buying another car with minimal distance on the clock.

He walked to the door, even as his mind rebelled, feeling like he was in a dream. Sliding into the bench seat- although exponentially harder than it had been so many years ago- felt a lot like coming back to comfort. To safe. To simple.

The Alpha patted the dashboard before fitting the key into the ignition. The loud rumbling purr of the engine made his heart beat triple time, his breath coming out in choppy pants with the tears that were leaking from his eyes like faucets. He half-laughed, half-cried, disbelief radiating off him.

“How?” he repeated again dumbly. Suddenly, the implications caught up with him and his blood ran cold. He yanked his hands off the wheel as if it were burning him. “Oh, God, baby…how much did you…I can’t accept this,” he shook his head, the words cutting his throat. “I can’t. How did you begin to…”

Jensen shut him up with a hard kiss, a lot more demanding than his mate usually was but just as hot. Jared tried to chase after his lips instinctively when Jensen pulled back, but he was stopped when his lover started to speak.

“I told you, Jay; I’ve got some contacts. Called in some favors and got the parts at a good price.” Jensen winked at him, looking relieved. “I’ll admit that these past three weeks taxed my time, trying to fix it, but I enjoyed working on it. Especially knowing it was for you.”

Jared blamed the shock of getting his Impala back, for how slow he was to react to those words.

“Wait,” he lowered wide eyes to Jensen’s, “are you telling me…did you fix the car?”

His boyfriend shrugged off his incredulous tone. “Well, yeah,” he nodded nonchalantly. “I know a thing or two about mechanics, it wasn’t much more reading up to do to get familiar with Chev engineering.”

“Jen.” Jared shook his head, still trying to comprehend what he was hearing. “The Impala was a write-off. A mechanic told us that there would need to be some really all-encompassing work that needed to be put in, if there was ever gonna be a chance for it to run again.”

“He was wrong.” Jensen smirked smugly. “Obviously.”

“He wasn’t wrong,” the Alpha shook his head, voice husky with want. “He just never met you.”

Without giving Jensen a chance to react, he leaned across the seat, capturing his mate’s lips in a bruising kiss that was all heat and carnal passion. One hand wrapped all the way around Jen’s slim waist while the other stroked possessively down the column of his throat, lightly grazing over all the spots that he was going to mark up all over again.

“Jay,” Jensen gasped around his lips, his own fingers scrabbling for purchase around Jared’s biceps. “Jay, one more…oh, God…one present.”
“Mm?” he growled, worrying at the hollow of his mate’s throat with his teeth. “What?”

“Cover…ah,” Jensen arched with a small mewl as Jared closed his mouth over his lover’s t-shirt covered nipple. “Cover for both of…Jared!”

He grinned as Jensen lost his speech once more, this time because of a wandering hand that pushed with just the right amount of force against the bulge in the front of Jensen’s jeans.

“Cover?” he prompted mischievously, running his fingertips along the waistband of his mate’s jeans.

“Alibis for both of us with Chad and Chris,” Jensen blurted out breathlessly. “If our parents ask. And this present,” his voice dropped to a low, smooth drawl, “comes with a very spacious backseat. Wanna see what else we can use the blindfold for?”

Jared groaned loudly, his dick pulsing eagerly at the thought.

Best present he ever had to unwrap.

~*Jensen*~

Waking up wrapped around his Alpha was Jensen’s favorite way to greet the morning.

He had missed it tremendously the past few weeks, since they’d been living separately. Granted, they were only living together for a tiny amount of time, but Jensen realized that time was inconsequential when it came to Jared and him. Minutes apart feel like days, and hours spent together fly like seconds. They’d been dating a few months, and it felt like they’d shared lifetimes. Those few days of domesticity? Quickest addiction anyone had ever acquired.

So Jensen relished in being tangled up in Jared early that Sunday morning. He found a unique calm in listening to the Alpha’s measured breaths, feeling the strong thudding of Jared’s heart against his back. Everything- Adam, the visions, the Morgan pack- none of it felt as scary anymore, not now that he was here with his mate.

He knew he had to level with Jared today. As much as he wanted to draw out his Alpha’s time to be normal, Jensen could feel the impending danger vibrating in his bones, and if the past had taught him anything, it was that keeping secrets was like asking your enemies to please strike you at your weakest point. And honestly, this wasn’t only about him and Jared anymore. It was about the pack too, and Jensen hadn’t realized when he’d started instinctively thinking about the pack’s well-being too, but with Jared’s position as their Alpha, it was a necessary skill.

His phone buzzing insistently in his pocket jerked Jensen from his train of thought. His hand shot out without moving his body away from Jared’s, groping blindly for his jeans that was strewn across the front seat. Jared groaned behind him as he started to wake up too, and Jensen threw him an apologetic smile while he fished his phone out. He checked the screen, noticing the flashing red icon next to the picture of him and Chris. A voice message. He made a mental note to listen to it as soon as he’d spoken to his best friend.

“Yo,” he greeted quietly, watching with a smile as Jared tried to shut his eyes again.

“You gotta get to my place ASAP, Freckles,” Chris’ taut voice came over the phone. “Gerald Padalecki is on his way here to see you.”
“What the fuck?!” he yelped, bolting upright and startling Jared into alarmed wakefulness. “Why?” he demanded as he gripped Jared’s knee, in an attempt at reassurance. “What’s going on?”

“Put me on speaker,” Chris instructed grimly. “I can hear Jared’s jaw clenching from here.”

Jensen huffed an annoyed breath, complying quickly. “You’ve got us both,” he invited, taking a deep breath to calm both himself, and his Alpha.

“Katherine is starting her humanization process tomorrow morning,” Kane wasted no time in explaining. “The Alpha knew you wanted to talk to her beforehand, and he wants to see you before you do.”

Jensen felt like he’d been sucker punched in the gut. Seeming to sense what he couldn’t say, Jared wrapped an arm around his waist, pulling him close to his broad, warm chest. He laid his hand over Jared’s forearm, an unspoken thank you.

“Right now?” Jared asked, his voice still crackly from sleep. The Alpha cleared his throat before asking again. “Does he want Jen to speak to her today?”

“Seems so,” Chris confirmed.

They exchanged a look, Jared’s forehead scrunched up in concern. “Thanks, Chris,” the Alpha eventually spoke quietly, taking the phone from Jensen’s hand and pressing his thumb against the screen to end the call.

Cuddling quietly for a moment, Jensen felt himself calming as Jared pressed his lips against the juncture between his shoulder and neck.

“So much for normal,” he whispered, his voice bitter and apologetic as he turned his cheek into Jared’s hair. “I’m sor-“

“Don’t, baby,” his Alpha stopped him, biting down gently against his soft skin. “You gave me three weeks without worrying by taking everything on yourself, and you gave me the best birthday I’ve ever had in my whole life.” Jared kissed his pulse point, smiling lightly. “I need to be on equal footing with you again. I love you for what you did for me, but it’s time for me to protect you now.”

“No more normal?”

“Normalcy is overrated,” Jared grinned as he threw Jensen’s words back at him. “And besides; I’d take what I have with you, over everything. Every day of the week.”

“Let’s hope you still think so after I tell you everything that needs telling,” Jensen murmured, carding his free hand through Jared’s hair. “Things are about to get complicated.”

Jared snorted indelicately. “Because it’s been so straight-forward this far?” The Alpha arched his eyebrow with a slight grin. “We make a kickass team, love. We can beat anyone.”

“I know,” Jensen whispered, unease twisting his gut. “I just hope the casualties of this war are few and far in between.”

“Hey.” Jared tilted his head up for a deep kiss. “Katherine first. Then we’ll talk. Then we’ll conquer.”

Jensen forced a smile on to his face, finding himself unable to taint Jared’s optimism with a dash of realism.
“Katherine, then talking, then conquering. Got it.”

With one last kiss, Jensen grabbed his clothes, ignoring the dull throbbing all over his body as he pulled them on. Grabbing the keys to Eric’s car, he left Jared in the middle of his in-depth inspection of the Impala, looking like a kid in a candy store.

He forgot to check the voice message waiting on his phone, in his haste to get to Chris’ place.

And so, Aldis Hodge’s voice message went unheard.

###

Chapter End Notes

*Cue danger music*!!! What a way to start the new year, huh?!! The song, Easy to love you, belongs to Lloyd Cele, but I suggest you check it out!! A friend put me on to it, and it's so sweet!

Let me know what you thought!!

Much love always!

-Jupiter <3
“Nice ride.”

Jared straightened at the sound of the voice, nearly spluttering when he was met with the familiar features of Joshua Ackles. His guard shot up and his hazel eyes narrowed.

“Jensen’s not here,” he informed the elder Ackles shortly. “Although I’m not sure I’d be happy with you talking to him even if he was.”

“You don’t control my brother,” Josh immediately snapped, a scowl twisting his face.

“That’s the big difference between the two of us,” Jared couldn’t help his retort. “I don’t try to.”

“And yet you stand there and tell me I can’t see Jensen.”

The Alpha bristled. “You’re the one who chose to leave, Josh.”

“Jensen’s the one who chose you over me,” he shot back petulantly.

“You shouldn’t have made him pick!”

“Okay, look,” Josh held up his hands impatiently, “we can stand here and do this all day, except I don’t have the time. I’m not even here to see Jensen; well, not right now, at least. I wanted to talk to you first.”

Experience made him wary, but Jared instinctively knew that the elder Ackles wouldn’t hurt him. He knew how to, thanks to Jake Abel, but he wouldn’t. Not because of Jared- God knew there was no love lost between the two of them- but because he was Jensen’s older brother. Jared had seen more than once how Josh’s protective older brother instincts outweighed all his other instincts, and he knew that this time, it would too, because he could never cause Jensen undue pain.

Leaning coolly against the hood of the Impala, Jared crossed his arms and sent the man a tempered look. “I’m listening.”

A flash of irritation glinted in Josh’s eyes, but it was quickly extinguished by forced patience and something that looked a lot like resignation.
“Look Padalecki,” Josh’s voice was frank, “I’m not gonna stand here and insult both of our intelligence by pretending that I’ve had this big change of heart and suddenly want to play happy families with you.” If anything, Jared could appreciate the man’s directness. “But you did save my brother from whatever trouble he was in, and for that, I owe you my respect. You’ve also been there for him unfalteringly, as I’ve been told,” his voice softened slightly, “and for that I owe you my gratitude. You protected my brother while I wasn’t here to do it. So thank you.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Jared spoke quietly, after a moment of careful consideration of the other man’s words. “I love him.”

Ackles seemed to chew on that for a beat before he nodded. “I know that. I don’t like you, Padalecki, but I want to try to get along with you. I need to. I missed so many years of my baby brother’s life…I can’t miss any more of it. I don’t want to lose him.” Josh took a breath. “If getting the chance to know my little brother, and be his big brother, means accepting and getting along with you, then I guess I’m here to ask you to start over again.”

Jared thought he would have had to think about that request, but surprisingly, the answer was ready on the tip of his tongue. He stuck out his hand. “Hi, I’m Jared Padalecki, and your brother is the love of my life,” he introduced himself by way of answer.

Josh smiled at him, his first genuine smile, filled with relief. The resemblance between the brothers became more apparent when their smiles came out—although Jared was sure Jensen's smile still rivaled his brother's. And possibly the sun, if brightness was being compared. Josh clasped Jared’s palm and shook it with a nod. “Joshua Ackles. I’m the one you’ll be answering to if you ever hurt my brother.”

Jared snorted inwardly. *Get in line.* “Good to meet you,” he said instead, allowing a small, relaxed smile to creep on to his face. “Clean slate,” he added.

“Clean slate,” Josh nodded, the final dredges of tension leaving his frame. “Do you know where I can find Jensen? I think I’ve got some apologizing to do.”

Jared hesitated for a moment, still leery of trusting anyone with Jensen. “How about I give you his number?” he suggested as a compromise. “Since you came here looking for him, I’m guessing you don’t have it. You can arrange with him to meet up.”

Josh nodded, and if Jared didn’t know any better, he’d have said that the elder Ackles was battling amusement. “Sounds good,” came the answer instead. Jared rattled off the digits that he knew by heart, listening patiently as it was read back to him.

“How’d you know where to come looking anyway?” Jared asked, frowning as he realized that Josh shouldn’t know about their future home.

“I managed to find that girl- Sandy’s- number,” Josh answered absently. “She told me that you guys help maintain the place since it used to be your grandfather’s.”

Jared was taken aback at the knowledge that Josh had spoken to Sandy, but then he guessed that Jen’s brother might have seen her around them at some point. He waved it off with a nod.

“That really is a great ride you’ve got there,” Josh offered another small smile, dipping his head towards the Impala in acknowledgement.

Jared lovingly patted the hood. “She’s beautiful,” he agreed with a grin, “thanks. Although your brother deserves all the credit; he’s the one who got her running again.”
“Jensen did this?” Josh’s voice rose with disbelief, pride warming his eyes. “That kid will never stop surprising me.”

“You don’t know the half of it, man.”

~*Jensen*~

Jensen thought that, after everything that happened with the packs, that it would somehow be easier to face Gerald Padalecki.

He was wrong.

It still felt like he was getting ready to face the firing squad, even though he knew for a fact that the Alpha was trying to get along with him better. His stomach twisted in knots despite Chris’ best efforts to distract him; he figured it would take a few meetings before he accepted the Alpha’s...well, acceptance.

“Let me use your phone,” Chris nudged him, pulling him back to reality. “I gotta call Sophia and my phone’s dead.”

“What happened to landline phones?” Jensen wondered, handing over his phone easily. “I don’t mind or anything,” he hastened to add, “it just occurred to me that hardly anyone uses them anymore.”

Chris snorted and Jensen was glad his friend understood him well enough to take the comment in stride. “Yeah, they don’t, Grandpa,” Kane teased. “Some of us liking being portable.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jensen brushed off the jibe airily. “Make your calls.”

Jensen entertained himself by investigating in Chris’ kitchen, making a mental note of what his friend had and what he needed to buy. He would have to bully his pseudo brother into making a trip to the grocery store soon, or Kane would happily subsist on a diet of instant noodles and grilled cheese.

“You know I survived a good few years before you came along?” Chris snarked as he came back into the kitchen, seeing what Jensen was doing.

Jensen dramatized a shudder. “Mother Luna herself only knows how.”

“Wow,” the long haired alpha barked a laugh, “Jared’s already got you speaking like a Were.”

He blinked, thinking back on his words and laughing sheepishly when he realized his unconscious slip. A seed of warmth spiraled in his chest, proud of the integrating they’d done in each other’s worlds.

“Yeah, well,” he grinned, “my mate and the majority of my friends are Werewolves. What’d you expect?”

Before Chris could answer, Jensen’s phone started buzzing, and Kane held it out to him with a grin. He took it, swiping his thumb across the screen to accept the call from the unfamiliar number.

“Jensen Ackles,” he answered formally, lest a college or a teacher be on the line.
“Why so serious, little brother?” Josh’s voice came over the line, in a horrible impression of the Joker. As awful as the impression was, it was amazing to hear his big brother’s voice again. He had convinced himself that he never would again, and tears prickled the back of his eyes as he fought to control the tidal waves of emotions roiling through his body.

For all his trying, Jensen couldn’t help the choked, “Josh…” that escaped his mouth.

“Hey, hey,” his brother’s voice turned soft and comforting, a hint of pain hidden there. “It’s alright, Jen. It’s okay. I’m an idiot, and I’m sorry, but I’m here.”

Jensen left the kitchen quickly, swiping impatiently at his eyes, wanting to have this conversation in relative privacy- he knew Chris could probably hear him, but he didn’t think he’d be able to talk with his best friend right there, knowing that Chris didn’t really like Josh.

“I thought you weren’t coming back,” he mumbled dully, heart panging as he remembered the way Josh had left. For all his anger, Jensen hadn’t expected his brother to actually take the ultimatum. He’d thought that Josh would just realize he was serious about Jared and try to make it work. Jared had coaxed him through a lot of tears over the past few weeks, whenever the memory would rear its head and shock him into sadness.

“Like I said; I’m an idiot.” Josh’s voice was soothing despite the self-recrimination, and Jensen found himself relaxing at the tone. “I should never have left,” the elder Ackles continued. “I should have found a way to make things work. I was just so hurt at the time…but I realize that the depth of what you feel for Jared, doesn’t lessen the depth of what you feel for me. I convinced myself you were punishing me for leaving you all these years, but I realize now that you were just fighting for the person you love.”

“You never left me,” Jensen stressed quietly. “You need to stop believing you did, because I don’t. That’s your issue, Josh, not ours.”

“I know,” Josh returned, and he actually sounded like he meant it. “I just…can we make it work, little bro?”

A smile curved Jensen’s lips upwards, feeling like a little bit of his equilibrium had just been restored. He wiped his face and laughed thickly. “Yeah. Yeah, we can, big brother.”

“Great,” Josh laughed, relieved. “When can I see you?”

“I got some stuff I need to sort out today…but how about tomorrow?” he asked hopefully.

“Sounds great,” his brother agreed warmly. Jensen hung up, feeling a smidgen lighter, like a weight was lifted from his shoulders. Accustomed to his pseudo brother’s insecurities, he made a point of throwing a casual arm around Chris’ shoulders as he came back into the kitchen.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” he adopted a stern voice. “Just because Josh is gonna be around at times, doesn’t mean you can be slacking off big brother duties. I’m not gonna accept any laziness; _double the backup_ for me, _does not mean half the load_ for you. Are we clear, brother?”

“Damn!” Chris grumbled, but Jensen could see the relief and affection in his blue eyes. “Here I thought I was finally getting rid of your needy ass.”

Jen heard the jibe for the thank you that it was, and smiled warmly at his best friend. “Not gonna happen, man,” he shook his head firmly, a note of seriousness entering his jesting tone. “You’re stuck with me.” He waited a moment, before adding, “No, seriously. You are. No one else can open that damn locker of mine.”
Chris barked a laugh, the sound bringing a smile to Jensen’s face. Between Josh and Kane, his nerves had settled immensely, making him feel a little steadier in the face of his pre-interrogation talk with Gerald Padalecki.

Katherine, then talking, then conquering. Maybe Jared was right. Maybe it would be as easy as that.

~*Jared*~

“I’m so fucking jealous right now, Jare, I mean…OW!”

Jared and Megan sniggered as Sherry Padalecki slapped Jeff across the back of his head with her trusty wooden spoon. Jared idly wondered how his momma seemed to be able to conjure her weapon of choice at will, whenever one of them rubbed her off the wrong way.

“Language, young man,” Sherry reprimanded sternly, hiding her own smile as her eldest son grumbled incoherently, rubbing the sore area. “I’m still your mother and you are still under my roof.”

“Yes, Momma,” Jeff dutifully responded; alpha or no, it would be bordering on insanity to challenge their mom. “Although Jensen is making him a spoilt brat,” he mock grumbled.

“Jeff has a point though,” Megan pointed out, smiling sympathetically at Jeff. “Jensen is amazing, Jare. I can’t believe he did all of that for you!”

“That boy is something special,” Sherry nodded her agreement, a small frown of concern etched on her forehead. “I think he worked himself to the bone these past three weeks, Jare. He’s been looking a little too pale for my liking; you need to keep an eye out for him.”

“Yeah,” Megan chimed in, scrunching her nose, “I mean, he’s always a hundred percent focused when he tutors me but as soon as we’re done, it’s like he’s in a different world.”

Anxiety twisted Jared’s gut. He had seen Jensen running himself ragged recently, but he hadn’t noticed things get as bad as his family was describing. In hindsight, he could admit that they hadn’t been seeing much of each other, thanks (Jared now knew) in large part to Jensen’s party planning. He couldn’t have noticed the fatigue if he wasn’t around.

Although he knew there was nothing but circumstances to blame, the Alpha still felt guilt sneak up on him.

“I’m gonna go check on him,” he announced worriedly, thankful for the understanding looks his family gave him. He thrilled in getting behind the wheel of the Impala, warmth filling him as she purred to life. Pulling out a lot more carefully than he might have with his truck, he backed out of the drive, cheerfully flipping Jeff off as their mom turned her back.

Jared sighed happily to himself as he drove. His mate really had spoilt him like crazy, and he couldn’t wait to start thinking about everything he was gonna do for Jen’s birthday.

His cellphone ringing interrupted his thoughts and he glanced at his caller ID.

_Dodge._

Why was the bar owner calling him and not Jensen? Curiosity filled the Alpha, and he slid his thumb
across the screen to answer.

“Hey Dodge, what’s…”

The phone buzzed violently in his hand, stopping his greeting midway. His phone’s logo flashed cheerfully at him and the screen went black.

What an awful time for his phone to die on him.

It probably wasn’t important; the man worried about Jensen, and was likely just wondering why Jen wasn’t answering his phone, not knowing that he was meeting with Jared’s dad. He’d just mention it to Jensen when he got there, so that his mate knew to give the man a call.

Jared pocketed his phone. It could wait till later.

~*Aldis*~

“Hey, this is Jared. I’m not…”

“Fuck!”

Aldis Hodge slammed his fist against the counter top of his bar, attracting the attention of several patrons. He glared challengingly at them, and predictably, they all looked away again.

He huffed out a breath. Anxiety was burning his insides and he knew he had to get to JR. Tell him what was happening, before ripping him and the White Bread a new one for not checking messages and taking calls. He crossed his arms as he leaned back against the back shelf, fingers drumming over his forearms as he thought.

JR was like a little brother to him. He remembered the day he first met the kid like it was yesterday; those big green eyes were more guarded than a kid his age had any right being, and he stood with his back straight and his head up, like a man who was ready to fight the world and win. Like a man who wouldn’t back away from a challenge because of his pride.

\textit{Like a man}, period.

It had bothered him at first, since he could still sense an undercurrent of nervousness behind that carefully cultivated mask. Why was a kid trying to take care of himself? Why wasn’t anyone taking care of him? And what in the name of all things holy, was the boy doing in these parts? Alone?

It wasn’t until months later that Aldis was introduced to JR’s foster father, and frankly, he still didn’t forgive the man for getting drunk as a lord so many times and making his son pick up his slack.

When Matt announced that he was taking the kid under his wing, Dodge thought his friend had officially lost the plot and was now batting for the mentally unstable team. He hadn’t been afraid to say just that, and a slight breeze could have knocked him to his ass when the kid spoke up boldly, demanding that they stop talking about him like he wasn’t there. No one had ever spoken back to him before- and definitely not in his own bar- and Matt had simply grinned maniacally at the look of disbelief on his face. When he could formulate a question, he asked the kid whether he had any idea of who he was talking to. To this day, Dodge never forgot his answer.
“The grinning Gummy Bear next to you- the one who thinks he can play pool- told me that you own this bar. You ask me like I’m supposed to be intimidated by that. There’s nothing daunting about having a bar, but it was a good try, Cupcake.”

With those words, on that day, Aldis recognized three irrefutable truths:

1-The kid was going to become one of the most badass guys this side of the hemisphere. The very same kid was going to eventually get out, and make a life for himself. He was too smart not to.

2-His best friend was gonna fall ass over heels in love with the kid, whether he knew it or not. No one else could have called him a Gummy Bear and gotten away with it. The fucker probably wouldn’t even realize how he felt fast enough, either.

And 3- The kid was going to become his little bro. He was going to do everything in his power to protect him, too; from everything and anyone, no matter what.

Couple years down the line, and sure enough, JR was a legend among them. He created a new life for himself outside of all this. Matty had fallen deeply in love with him, and realized it a little too late.

And he was still doing everything in his power to protect his little brother.

Eventually, he called his buddy to cover the bar for him, flipped up his kickstand and pointed his bike in the direction of Jensen’s new home.

From everything and anyone. No matter what.

It’s like he told JR all those years ago, when the kid had pinned him with those eyes, unflinching bravery showing through glinting green sparks.

I’ll protect you, Kid.

~*Jensen*~

“Jensen.”

The green-eyed artist had to consciously remind himself not to react as Gerald Padalecki said his name, although a big part of him had wanted to start at the unfamiliar greeting and the lack of disdain in the current Alpha’s tone. It took some getting used to, but he was incredibly grateful for the efforts and lengths the man was going to, and he was determined to meet him halfway on it.

He held out his hand with a warm smile. “Morning, Mr. Padalecki,” he offered, shaking his hand firmly and confidently, like Eric had taught him when he was a kid. “It’s good to see you,” he added politely.

Gerald smiled and Jen read the appreciation in his hazel eyes- eyes that were so like Jared’s.

“Good to see you too, although I wish the circumstances were better,” Gerald returned, his voice sounding weary.

“Right,” Jensen nodded, his smile disappearing as concern wrinkled his brow, “Chris mentioned that you wanted to talk to me about my…about Ms. Talley.”
The Alpha’s eyes burned with sympathy, but to his credit, he didn’t offer Jensen meaningless platitudes. “Let’s chat in the living room, if Chris has no objections?”

Kane appeared at his elbow and Jensen instantly relaxed a little with his best friend’s comforting presence. The long-haired alpha nodded with a taut smile, and Jensen knew his brother would be unable to switch off from ultra-protective mode; not after what had happened in that park.

He stepped aside to allow Gerald in, and if the Alpha noticed that Chris kept Jensen angled behind him, he didn’t say anything.

Jensen gestured to the couches and the Senior Padalecki settled himself on to the single seater. Jensen and Chris, an unspoken agreement between them, took their places opposite him, on the three seater.

“We begin the humanization process tomorrow,” Gerald didn’t waste time getting to the point. “Jim Beaver tells me that you requested a meeting with Talley?” The Alpha made the statement into a question, aiming it at Jensen.

He nodded the affirmative. “I wanted to speak to her before she started the process, in the event that she doesn’t make it out alive,” he stated clinically, his voice masking his mixed emotions.

“May I ask the purpose of this meeting?” Gerald asked curiously seeming unfazed at Jensen’s emotional detachment. “I would have thought it would be Chris that was requesting a meet.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to her,” Kane answered, giving Jensen the chance to consider his own answer. “I made my decision and I don’t want to look back. I want to look forward now.”

“That’s admirable, Chris,” the Alpha acknowledged, his eyes glinting with newfound respect. “But Jensen?” He turned those eyes back on the artist. “Why do you wish to meet with the woman who attempted to kill you several times?”

The artist was quiet as he considered his words carefully. “My dad always used to tell me ‘Jensen, in order for one to prepare for the future, one must know the past. Understand it.’ He steepled his fingers in front of him, focusing his gaze there. “I need to get some answers to some questions, and I feel like if I don’t? It could potentially destroy everything y’all have worked so hard to protect.”

“Questions like what, baby?” Jared suddenly appeared in the archway, a concerned expression on his face. “I let myself in, by the way,” he grinned mischievously at Chris, who rolled his eyes in response. The future pack Alpha dropped down to sit next to Jensen. “You okay?” Jared murmured to him, one hand finding his and grasping it supportively. Although they had agreed that Jared wouldn’t impose on his meeting with the Alpha, Jensen found himself immensely grateful that his lover had all but ignored that decision.

“I’m okay,” he nodded quietly, shooting his Alpha a reassuring smile. “I want to know how she knew the lay of the land so well that she’s been able to move through undetected. Twice.” His voice turned analytical, calculating, as he began to look at everything he knew with the keen eye of a seasoned street major. “Once, nine years ago,” he refrained from detailing the loss his best friend had suffered that night, “and then again when Joe attacked. And while we’re on that topic, I really want to know why Joe attacked me that day.” He pursed his lips in thought, replaying that awful memory in his head and trying to consider it impartially. “We thought he was after the pups, or Chris…” he frowned, starting to shake his head. “But I think I was the real target. Which makes no sense.”

“I think it makes perfect sense.” Gerald’s voice jerked him back to the room, reminding him that he was in the company of three others. “You said they thought they were some sort of pure breed vigilantes. They were after anyone in human-Were relationships.”
“Nuh-uh,” he refuted absently, “I said that Gabe thought he was some kind of pure breed vigilante.” Glancing at the confused expression on the Alpha’s face, Jensen quickly added, “Gabe was the lone wolf’s mate. He tortured me and tried to kill me and Jared.”

Gerald’s eyes flashed, fury seeming to vibrate through his form for a second. “Your point?”

Jensen didn’t take the harsh tone to heart, knowing that it came from the aftereffects of having to remember that someone had tried to hurt his kid.

“I think Joe and Katherine had their own agenda,” he explained, abandoning the use of formal names. “By their usual M.O. they should have never attacked to begin with.”

“But Katherine’s always wanted to kill you,” Chris pointed out bluntly.

To Jensen’s pleasure, it was Jared who answered. “Katherine, maybe, but Joe had no reason to want Jen dead.” The Padalecki heir’s eyes narrowed as he thought, gears working to take in everything Jensen was saying.

He sent his lover an approving nod. “Precisely.”

The room fell into a loaded silence as the three wolves processed the information. Jensen waited patiently; he’d had a lot of time to think about all of this, a lot of time to come to terms with all of it, and it was only fair to afford them the same courtesy. It was like having an intricate puzzle with lots of lopsided pieces and no idea of the picture you were trying to form.

Finally, it was Jared’s father that broke the silence, heaving a measured sigh. “What makes you think she’ll talk to you?”

Once again, it was Jared who answered, unconsciously proving just how in sync the mates were.

“She won’t talk to **him,**” Jared jerked his head at Jensen. “But she’ll talk to **JR.** She won’t have a choice.”

~*Jared*~

When Jared was 16, he asked his momma what was some of the important things he needed to know, for the day he found his mate. She had smiled gently at him, and gave him three pieces of advice that Jared hadn’t ever forgotten.

*Listening is sometimes the only thing you need to do.*

*Protect your mate as precious as gold, treat your mate as fragile as glass, and believe of your mate as mighty as the mountains.*

*Sometimes you must support your mate, even if you don’t necessarily agree with them.*

Since meeting Jensen, he’d employed the first two almost all the time. Now, the Alpha had to bite his tongue and heed the third.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Jensen. Mother Luna knew that definitely wasn’t the problem; he trusted Jensen more than anyone in the world. He just didn’t particularly trust Jensen to do what was best for himself.
His beautiful future Beta, more often than not, valued their safety above his own. Which, Jared wasn’t ashamed to admit, made him terrified.

As an Alpha, he knew that he had to put his pack’s welfare over and above all else. He had no hesitation placing their well-being over his own, but without a thought, he knew that the same consideration could not- would not- be made with his mate’s welfare. Maybe it made him a bad Alpha…Jared would boldly wear that fault, because he doubted that he would ever willingly compromise Jensen.

Which brought him to his current dilemma.

Even as he said the words, Jared wasn’t keen on the idea of Jensen turning into JR for this… interrogation. Doubtlessly, his mate would get the truth from her, in his usual scary fashion. What plagued his mind, was the knowledge of how much it took from Jensen, to turn into that hardened gangster. It wasn’t an easy transition to make between the two, and Jensen had handled it with grace previously, but the toll became greater on him the more often he had to do it. Jared was worried that this time, the change might be inexcusably difficult for his mate to manage. Though he would be able to, Jared had to wonder what it would take from him in the process.

On the other hand, though, the answers that Jensen was looking for related to him and the pack. Based on that alone, he wouldn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of convincing his stubborn, pretty mate to leave well enough alone.

And so, against his judgment, Jared had to support his lover, even if he didn’t quite agree with him.

“JR?” Only the flash of his eyes betrayed his father’s amusement. “Would that be the part of you,” Gerald directed his question at Jensen, “that reduced JD Morgan to a blubbering imbecile?”

Despite himself, Jared snorted, and Chris chuckled almost gleefully. Even Jensen managed a wan grin as he nodded the affirmative.

“The very same part.”

“Well,” his dad smirked broadly, “I can hardly say that I would mind using that to our advantage again.”

All traces of his mirth vanished, and Jared rankled at the implication that Jensen was to be used as an advantage against enemies. As though sensing his displeasure, his father raised a hand, palm facing up, in a gesture of peace.

“That is to say, I wouldn’t mind, as long as it didn’t impact you negatively,” he added, and Jared’s Alpha settled down at the unspoken apology.

There was a nanosecond of hesitation on his mate’s face, and Jared swooped in like a bird of prey.

“May I speak with my mate alone for a minute, Alpha?” he asked, making it clear that he was speaking as his father’s successor, and not as his son.

Nostalgia and respect made for a volatile combination in his father’s face, but he was granted a nod of consent. Gently, he tugged Jensen’s hand and led him outside to the porch, closing the door behind him.

“I can do this interrogation,” Jensen’s stubborn tone came before he could even turn around. A flickering of amusement hit him at his future Beta’s matching obstinate expression. “I can handle it.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second,” he soothed immediately, hoping his eyes conveyed his honesty.
“All that concerns me, is the aftermath of it.”

“What does it matter if we get our answers?” Jensen asked with a scoff, probably intending to sound rhetoric.

“It matters,” Jared answered anyway, his voice insistent, “because you are my mate and my love, and I don’t feel comfortable with you putting yourself on the line like this all the time.”

Jensen huffed a sigh, but his eyes softened at Jared’s words. “I won’t be putting myself on the line, Jay…”

“Yeah?” Jared crossed his arms in front of his chest, mirroring Jensen’s pose. “Tell me honestly that you think it will be easy for you to go from Jensen to JR, and then back to Jensen after that.”

“I know it won’t be easy,” his mate conceded, dropping his arms listlessly to his side, “but it will be easier than usual.” Jared felt his heart clench at the open, raw look on his lover’s face. “I’ll have you.” Jensen aimed a tired, half-smiled at him. “You make me remember who I am. Who I’m supposed to be.”

Probably as intended, Jared’s defensive demeanor drained away. Without a word, he gathered his mate in his arms, pulling him in as close as possible and breathing in his scent. His grip must have hurt a little, but Jensen didn’t move away; on the contrary, he simply nestled his head into the crook between Jared’s neck and shoulder, eyes closed.

“You have to let me do this, Jay,” Jensen whispered. “We won’t forgive ourselves if I don’t, and something happens because of it.”

“I won’t forgive myself if something happened to you,” he shot back stubbornly, knowing how futile his arguing was, but unable to let go of his concerns. Sighing gustily, he racked his mind for a compromise. “Jen, baby…” he cradled his mate’s face in his palms, angling him to meet his eyes. “I’m gonna step back and support you in this, but I need two things in return.”

Jared watched as tired gratitude fell into Jensen’s green orbs, mixed with a calm trust. “Anything,” he nodded, and once again, Jared felt bolstered by the level of trust between them.

“Tell me why the change between the two has been so difficult recently.”

Jensen answered without hesitation. “JR’s mindset is kill or be killed,” he spoke frankly. “It’s difficult for me because JR can’t have that attitude anymore, not if I want to come back to you, Jay.” He bit his lip, looking like he was searching for the words. “It’s becoming more like I’m trying to meld two parts of myself,” he finally explained. “Like I’m trying to mix parts of the real me, into the fundamental parts of JR. It can be hard, sometimes, to remember that I’m not him anymore. Especially since I have so much more to fight for now.” Jensen’s eyes pinned him with a meaningful look.

Jared slowly let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. That made sense, in a way, and he was actually relieved that Jensen was trying not to be kamikaze. He leaned down and caught his lover’s lips in a heated kiss, trying to convey his gratitude.

“What’s the other thing?” his mate asked him quietly when they broke apart, the beginnings of a smile quirking his lips upwards.

The Alpha pressed his forehead against his mate’s, eyes fluttering closed. “Promise me you’ll remember,” he murmured roughly, arms tightening around Jensen’s waist when the artist’s breathing hitched. “Promise me you won’t let go of who you are, because of who you think you need to be.
Promise you’ll stay my Jensen.”

Jensen started nodding as soon as the first words were out of his lips, and now, his mate tapped his cheek gently in a bid to get Jared to open his eyes.

“I promise,” he murmured, as soon as Jared did. “Just…be there? When I get done?”

“I’ll be there the entire time,” he promised vehemently. “Wild horses couldn’t drag me away.”

Jensen nodded, slightly shakily. “Then let’s go get those answers, huh?”

~*Jensen*~

He was unbound, healthy and standing tall- Katherine wasn’t nearly as intimidating to him anymore.

Without the threat of death hanging over him, he was much calmer, recognizing that she was a softer target than some other people he’d had to go up against. If he could put his emotions aside, this was going to be a cakewalk.

“Nephew,” she sneered as soon as she saw him. “That pretty face is all…pretty, again.”

“Something you’d know nothing about, obviously,” he snarked, pulling up a chair opposite her, refusing to rise to her barbs. He was in complete JR mode now, totally in control of himself and his emotions. “How have you been enjoying the five star digs?” he asked dryly, glancing around Mr. Beaver’s damp, dusky basement.

“Every girl’s dream holiday destination.”

Jensen snorted. “Bet you’re loving those accessories too,” he flicked his head in the direction of the silver manacles around her wrist. “They’re the hot new thing on the Milan fashion circuit.”

“You must really be loving this,” she spat, losing her cool quicker than Jensen expected. “Are you happy right now?”

He sighed lightly. If he were sticking with JR, he would have kept mocking. He would have goaded and snapped and irked until she cracked, or flipped out his knife as unspoken motivation if she didn’t.

But he promised Jared. He couldn’t be JR anymore, he wasn’t that guy.

“I’m not,” he answered instead, subduing his voice. “Enjoying it, I mean. I feel sorry for you.”

If anything, those words had her cracking quicker than if he had continued to jibe her. “Don’t you feel sorry for me!” she screeched. “I would sooner be here, facing a fate worse than death, than to be where you are standing.” She lowered her voice again, each word coming out with a purposeful little stab. “Poor, little, pathetic, orphaned Jensen.” A vicious expression entered her eyes. “You bring pain and suffering wherever you go. The people who dare to love you, they’re the ones who pay for it! Starting with my baby sister.”

Jensen, in the midst of the sudden grief that hit him at the words, felt a streak of violent anger that wasn’t his own.
“Then that airheaded little foster lady bit the dust too,” she continued, unaware of the danger that was just behind the basement door. She clicked her tongue, a disparaging look in her eyes. “Poor little Jensen sent another ignorant soul to an early grave.”

Before the words could fully leave her mouth, the door smashed open, and suddenly Jared was there. Jensen could feel the fury of an Alpha mate rolling off him in waves and with seemingly no effort, Jared lifted Katherine by the throat, pinning her to the nearest wall, dangerous rumbles exploding from his chest.

“You nearly took my mate away from me!” he growled savagely, and Jensen was rooted to the spot, unable to react. “You hurt him, over and over, and you think I’m going to stand by and let you do it again? Let you live?”

And it was those words that snapped him back to reality. The JR part of him took control, realizing Katherine’s tactics, even as another part of him throbbed with that familiar feeling of missing some vital piece of a puzzle.

“Let her go, Jay,” he commanded firmly, but softly. “She’s baiting you. She wants to die. She’d rather die than become human, and she’s goading you into giving her an out.” He sent calming emotions over their mating bond, reaching out to gently caress the nape of his Alpha’s neck. “Let her go, Jay.”

After an agonizing moment that could have been seconds, minutes, hours, Jared released his grip on her. Katherine slumped to the floor, choking and spluttering.

He grabbed Jared’s hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles, a quick thank you. His mind was working a mile a minute, trying to discern what he had missed. He began running through their conversation from the beginning, mulling over small details and working to pinpoint what had set his JR radar off.

He could almost taste the answer in the back of his throat…so of course, that was the moment all hell broke loose.

“Protective Alpha mate,” Katherine rasped from where she was sitting on the floor. “Did he…react this way…when he found out…that foster daddy was abusing you?”

###

Chapter End Notes

Le gasp!! The cat is out of the bag!

Hope y'all enjoyed the stint in Aldis' mind!

Let me know what y'all think!! <3
I'll Save You Baby (You Saved Me Too)

Chapter Notes

I cannot even *start* apologizing for how late I am with this chapter. I hope its length makes up for my lateness, and I promise to keep it coming faster now!!

A HUGE and most sincere apology to Jensenismysuperhero. To my deepest chagrin, my forgetfulness bit me in the ass, and I forgot to thank this wonderful reader for the idea she's so graciously lending me, of pitting JR against Katherine and letting Jen lose control. Thank you SO much, hon. Biggest of ups to Jensenismyhero, and deepest of apologies too!! <3

A humungous thanks to all my loyal and amazing readers. You guys make my <3 smile!! Much love!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

Shock numbed his body and everything went as still as the graves.

*Oh, God, no.*

Before the thought could fully materialize in his head, he felt a burst of unadulterated fury in his chest- not his own.

Jared’s.

He stood frozen in place as Jared stalked up the stairs and out the door, without even glancing back at him. The sound of his mate’s fading steps bolstered him back into action and he ignored Katherine’s cackling in favor of running after Jared.

“Jay, wait, please,” he entreated, fighting back relief when Jared stopped at the front door. The Alpha didn’t turn around and Jensen felt a pang of fear at what that meant. “I didn’t mean for you…” he fumbled, stuttering nervously. “I mean, you weren’t supposed to…I was going to…”

“Tell me?” Jared’s frigid voice cut him off, running through his chest like a lance. “You were going to tell me, Jensen? When was this going to happen? Before or after another beating?”

Flinching painfully, Jensen wrapped his arms around himself, in a bid to quell the pain that was searing his heart. “I…I couldn’t…th-things were so c-complicated…”

Without warning, Jared’s fist smashed against the wall next to the door, creating a dent in the plaster. Jensen couldn’t help the yelp that escaped his lips, and slight trembles wracked his frame.

“Do not,” Jared intoned lowly, “tell me that it was complicated. He put his hands on you – more than once – and you lied to me about it. I asked you, Jensen! And you lied to me.”
A bit of anger trickled into his system, fighting past the heartbreak. “You’d known me for all of a week,” he protested, his voice still sounding painfully timid to his ears. “And by the time I got to know you, he’d stopped, and I just…”

“Just thought that it’d be okay to keep secrets from me our whole lives?” Jared’s flat voice was a little more hurtful than his angry voice. “Because you obviously weren’t going to tell me if your psycho Aunt hadn’t decided to blurt it out.”

A flash of hesitation stopped Jensen’s defense in his throat. He liked to think that he would have told Jared about it eventually, on his own terms. But truthfully? He wasn’t sure if his fears would have stayed with him his entire life. If the threat of Jared looking at him like he was weak…looking at him in disgust, was enough of a fear to keep him from speaking of it ever again.

“Yeah.” His Alpha shook his head bitterly. “That’s what I thought.”

Jared flung the door open almost violently, stepping out on to the porch, his jerky motions telegraphing his anger. He made a move to follow, but he didn’t get five paces before Jared stopped and whirled around to snap out a warning at him.

“Don’t! Just don’t.”

He met his Alpha’s blazing eyes, and the hurt and anger in them broke his heart. He felt sick, knowing that the resentment and disgust was directed at him from the one person whose eyes it should never have come from.

Just like he was afraid of.

He knew Jared would react like this.

He knew this was all too good to be true.

After a tense moment, Jared turned on his heels and left, a storm of anger in his wake. Jensen felt weak and broken; two emotions that no one had ever been able to inspire in him before.

Not Adam. Not Eric. Not even losing his family twice.

He became aware of Jim standing awkwardly behind him, uncertainty coming off him in waves. He remembered why he was there; what he had come for.

And like clockwork, JR came back.

A dim part of Jensen’s mind protested as the cold, detached persona took hold of him fully. He knew he was breaking his promise to Jared…

…but obviously Jared wasn’t there to give enough of a fuck about that.

He supposed he should have felt a little scared, as the familiarity of JR came over him. It had been a while, but he knew the dangers of letting that side of him take complete control. But it was like that broken part inside of him could only possibly survive if he separated himself from his feelings, his emotions. Like ice freezing his insides, he felt his defenses go up until all he felt was numbness. He shut completely into himself; the only thing on his mind now was getting his captive to talk.

*Play on her fears, her weaknesses. Gouge the holes in her armor if you want her to falter. Target old wounds. Pull no punches.*
It was a prep talk he hadn’t given himself in a while, since he'd always hated how cruel he could become, but now he welcomed the cold emptiness inside him. He embraced the ruthlessness, since it made the agony, the soul-deep ache inside of him, dull.

His very own brand of drug.

A distant part of him realized that he had been afraid of precisely this; his control was so stringent because he feared what would happen the day he accepted JR into himself like this. It was like darkness was permeating his core, and he was caught up in a hurricane that he had no hopes getting out of.

Worst of all, he knew that no one could help him out of this. Jared was the only one who might’ve been able to…but he had made his choice.

JR turned his heart to ice, and stepped back into the house.

~*Jared*~

To say that Jared was livid, would be like commenting that the sun was lightly warm.

That is to say, he had passed livid a few towns ago.

A red haze of utter fury was blanketing his vision and his veins felt like they were pumping liquid fire. His control was completely shattered, he knew because his wolf kept flickering in and out of him like a shadow, and his nails had already halfway extended to claws, his teeth to fangs.

Rather than trying to control his Alpha, Jared let go. Shifting fully, he landed lightly on his paws and began to run, not really even knowing where he was going. His Jared instincts – which were screaming at him to go back to his mate, comfort him, reassure him – were drowned out unequivocally by his Alpha instincts – which were telling him to hunt down anything that caused his Beta pain and eliminate it.

Logically, he knew that the approach his baser instincts were urging him to take would only end up hurting Jensen. Unfortunately, he was far from logic at that moment.

Not unfortunately, Jensen had fucking amazing friends.

Without warning, something barreled into his side, knocking him to the ground. He let himself roll, and when he caught the smell of pack, he simply jumped back to his feet and leaped at the other wolf, his Alpha strength allowing him to completely pin the copper colored Were. He pressed a paw into the other alpha’s throat, only loosening his hold when it bared its throat in submission.

What the fuck do you want, Chris? he asked harshly, jumping to the side and allowing Kane to get back on four paws.

Even dusting himself off, Kane had the gall to bare his teeth at him. Shift. Now. I ain’t doing this over mind-speak when I don’t know who can hear us.

Grudgingly, Jared shifted forms, taking a few deep breaths to calm himself down. Apparently Chris had no such intention.
“You’re a real fucking piece of work, Jared, you know that?” Chris was up in his face the minute they were both vertical.

“Don’t go there, Chris,” he warned acerbically. “I am not…”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what you are, Padalecki, because here’s a news flash for you buddy. This ain’t about you.” Kane’s face was pinched with fury, and Jared knew a fraction of that anger was directed at him. “It ain’t about you,” he repeated hardly.

The Alpha growled, running a hand through his hair. His anger slowly receded with the display of schoolyard logic. “He lied to me about those bruises, Chris.”

“And you’ve been so fucking truthful through your entire relationship?” Chris demanded. “Like that time that you told him all about the prophetic nightmares you were having? Or like that time you cleared the J.A.W Initiative with him? And let’s not forget about that time that you gave him a heads-up; well in advance, mind you; about you being an Alpha Werewolf?”

“That’s different,” he snarled defensively, even as he knew that his anger was directed least of all at his mate. “Jen was getting hurt.”

Chris nodded slowly, his temper noticeably dwindling once he noticed the source of Jared’s anguish; that his beautiful mate had been hurt. “Precisely.” Kane’s voice almost softened. “And he was going to tell that to two guys he had just met, why exactly?”

Jared’s brain saw reason, but he offered up a token argument. “He could have mentioned it any time after we’d gotten together.”

“What good would that have done?” Chris sighed as he dropped to sit heavily on a boulder. “The bastard stopped, according to Jen, and when you think about how he wants to protect us from everything, should this really have surprised you?”

To the Alpha’s shock, it was easy to drop his guards down and listen to Kane’s insights. He sat on the floor of the woods – he had actually, unconsciously, ended up quite close to his and Jen’s clearing – and leaned against the boulder next to Chris.

“I’m less upset that he didn’t tell me, and more upset that I didn’t figure it out,” he admitted roughly. “That I didn’t put a stop to it immediately. That the bastard put his hands on my mate and I didn’t put the pieces together after smelling him. I should have figured it out the day I met him.”

“There were a lot of times when we should have figured it out,” Chris agreed quietly. “But we didn’t. That’s something I’m not forgiving myself for anytime soon.” The other alpha levelled a hard gaze at him. “But at least I’m not blaming the person who doesn’t deserve to be blamed.”

Jared frowned at the use of words. “I don’t blame Jensen,” he denied, his tone heavy with the implied duh. “That would be ridiculous. I’m upset and I hate that he had to carry that alone in an attempt to protect me, but I could never blame him. Mother Luna knows he’s too inherently good not to have forgiven that waste of space that calls himself a father.” Jared’s hackles rose once more at the thought of the man that had put marks on his beautiful mate. As much as he may have stopped- as evidenced by the lack of bruises on Jensen’s body since that one, God awful day- he was going to pay for what he had done before.

“And yet,” Chris interrupted his train of thought, “you walk away from him when he’s at his most vulnerable, and direct nothing but anger at him. What do you think he’s going to take that as, Jared? His Alpha unable to control his emotions, or his Alpha thinking him feeble and pathetic? His Alpha
thinking him incapable and angry at him because of it?”

A warning rumbled through Jared’s chest at the implications that his mate was anything but strong and amazing for all he’d had to contend with. “Don’t ever…”

“I didn’t,” Chris cut through his words. “You did. This is one of precious few things that make Jensen vulnerable...now you tell me how he might have interpreted your actions.”

Jared thought of the look of shattered devastation that was in Jensen’s eyes when he left. The look of fear that- fuck- should never ever be there when he looked at Jared.

The look that his Alpha was insistent on ignoring in favor of bloodlust.

His stomach bottomed out and it felt like he’d swallowed lead. “I’m a fucking moron.”

“Nah,” Chris huffed a brittle laugh. “Just an Alpha. I’ve realized since meeting Soph, that having a mate, to any alpha, is more than finding your soul mate. It’s also finding your strength and your power and in this case? Finding your control.” Kane turned to look at him, a degree of sympathy in his eyes. “I’ve seen how Jensen can temper your Alpha instincts. Give you that perfect balance between Alpha and man. You slipped up today, but I guess I understand why.”

“Did Beaver phone you?” Jared guessed.

His answer came in the form of a nod. “I wanted to go straight to Jensen, or better yet to his foster father, but then Beaver told me you disappeared. Jensen’s my brother, but I knew that he needed you. Not me. So I told Jim I’d track you down, knock some sense into you.”

“Thanks for that,” Jared mumbled grudgingly, getting up and dusting his ripped jeans off.

“Go be there for my best friend,” Chris responded, looking grim. “Beaver sounded almost intimidated on the phone. Said that Jen was looking fucking lethal.”

For the second time in just as many minutes, Jared’s stomach dropped. “JR,” he muttered foreboding striking him deep as he remembered his mate’s words.

*Just...be there? When I get done?*

*You make me remember who I am. Who I’m supposed to be.*

Before Chris could ask him anything, or say another word, Jared was in his wolf form and sprinting back the way he’d come, his paws barely touching the forest floor as he remembered the promise he’d spoken back.

*I’ll be there the entire time. Wild horses couldn’t drag me away.*

~*Jensen*~

So sensitized was he to the change, that Jensen could have sworn he felt the icicles coating the blood flowing through his veins. His body tingled with anticipation as he blatantly ignored the part of him that was struggling to be heard, the part of him that never wanted to be as cold as he knew he was about to be. Distantly, he wondered whether this was what it felt like to have Were instincts.
Ignoring Mr. Beaver’s concerned look, Jensen strode back into the house, walking into the kitchen like he owned the place and snatching up a paring knife. Unorthodox though it may have been, JR was always partial to the smaller knives, since they were easier to target the small nuances of the human body that – in his experience – always seemed to hurt even more than the bigger targets.

Some part of his mind registered Beaver muttering rapidly into his phone, but in JR’s mind, the target took precedence.

He took the stairs two at a time, looking hardly back at Katherine when she glanced gleefully at him. “That was entertaining,” she giggled, sounding almost hysterical. “I didn’t even know lover boy was in the dark about Daddy! Well, that was just good luck I guess!”

Jensen smiled coolly back at her, the flash of teeth doing its job as a cautioned look entered her eyes. “Yeah, maybe luck had something to do with that…but you know,” he added conversationally, “the funny thing about luck, is that it can turn on you in a damn second.” He huffed a mirthless laugh, sitting on the edge of his chair, which was still positioned in front of her. “Just when you think something worked out for the better, you find out that all it did, was screw you over even worse than initially.”

He began twirling the knife around his fingers in practiced motions, watching with dark satisfaction as trepidation entered Katherine’s eyes. “See, Jared,” he continued, his voice grim, “he’s kind of the only person that can keep me from falling off a very precarious edge. An edge that I knew would turn me into a very bad person if I had to tumble off it. We all have a certain level of mercilessness in us,” he shrugged, as if to say what can you do? “Wouldn’t you agree, Aunt Kath?”

Not surprisingly, the woman remained quiet, but for the slight increase in her breathing as nervousness began to take hold.

“With Jared having left,” Jensen kept speaking, as though she’d answered, “I don’t really feel any need to keep from giving myself up to my more darkly-inclined actions.” He held up his paring knife. “Starting with seeing how much damage one little knife can do.”

“What do you think that will achieve?” Katherine spat out in an attempt at bravado. “Think it’ll make you feel better? Think it’ll make your orphaned buddy feel better?”

With a sudden, forceful movement, he slammed the knife to embed it deep into the ground next to where she sat, inches from her shackled wrist. Katherine let out a little scream, trembling as Jensen stayed silent for a few moments.

“You don’t get to talk about him,” he warned in a low, icy voice. Deep into JR as he was, he still wasn’t going to let her taint Chris with her bullshit. “You don’t get to talk about my brother, or what you did to his family.” He reached over and yanked the knife out, relishing in her flinch. “Understood?”

Nodding shakily, Katherine raised her eyes to his again.

“I want answers,” he stated shortly, done with the beating around the bush. “I want to know why you killed pack members, why you tried so hard to kill me.” He trailed the knife along the already-bruising skin around her throat. “I want to know how you and Joe knew where to find me that day in the clearing. I want to know why it seems like your grudge is against the Padalecki pack, instead of targeted at me.”

“That’s what it comes down to, isn’t it?” she asked quietly. “You’re doing this for his pack. Even
after he dumped you! You think they’ll welcome you with open arms because you did all this to protect them.” The woman shook her head as much as the knife would allow her to. “We’re not so different, you and me. We would go to great lengths for love and family. For acceptance.”

“We’re nothing alike,” Jensen refuted coldly, pulling his hand back twirl the knife around his fingers again. He leaned back in his chair and lifted an eyebrow lazily. “I’ve never spent nearly a decade trying to convince myself that I was a part of something because I couldn’t handle the truth. The truth that the only person who could have loved me was dead.” He regarded her harshly. “The biggest difference is that I actually dealt with her death while you just blamed everyone else.”

As he predicted, bringing his mother up was the punch that broke through the last of her defenses. “She shouldn’t have! She…shouldn’t have…” Tears began to roll down her cheeks, anger flushing them red.

“I agree. It should have been you.” He let out a decidedly unamused snort, feeling no remorse for his cold words. “There’s a thought I know a lot of people must have had.”

Getting up off his chair and pressing the tip of the knife against her neck once more, Jensen spoke bluntly. “Give me my answers or I swear I’ll find out just how much I can make you bleed so that you can still get humanized tomorrow.”

Dark power made him almost heady, the sounds of Jensen in the back of his mind being almost drowned out by JR noise.

Before he could press down harder, draw the first drop of blood that would cross him over that unspeakable line, his salvation came.

“Jensen, baby, no.”

~*Jared*~

It scared Jared more than he cared to admit, seeing his beautiful mate with a knife against someone’s throat, even if that someone was Katherine Talley.

Jensen’s head jerked up at his voice, and it shook the Alpha to his core to see the deadness in his lover’s stunning emerald eyes. Guilt gnawed at him; he had allowed Jensen to become the very thing that he never wanted to be. He had promised not to let Jensen fall into that chasm, but when it mattered, he hadn’t been there.

But he wasn’t too late to stop Jen from crossing lines he’d never allowed himself to cross before.

Taking a deliberate and cautious step forward, he held up his palms. “It’s okay, baby,” he reassured, his voice low and soothing. “I’m here. I’m right here, Jen. I’m not going to let you forget. I’m not going to let you be something you’re not.”

Jensen’s hand moved slowly away, but no warmth breached his hard eyes. “Leave, Jared,” he returned evenly. “You had no problem doing so a little while ago.”

“I was scared,” he admitted softly, not taking offense to his mate’s words. “I was angry that you got hurt and I was afraid that you didn’t tell me because you didn’t trust me.” He shook his head ruefully. “I realized that you were trying to protect me and from the way I reacted, I definitely can’t
deny that you might have been right.”

He let those words sink in before taking another few, careful steps towards his mate. “But we are a team. You are my mate, and my Beta, and my partner. We gotta share stuff, so that no one can use secrets against us. The only way we’re going to function as the team I know we are, is if we have complete disclosure from now on.”

“Because you’ve handled complete disclosure so great, thus far.”

Jared flinched, a part of him growing cold as if Jensen’s flat eyes and tone were freezing him from the inside out. He missed the warmth that Jensen had exuded and permeated his soul since the day they first met, and Jared was all too aware that he couldn’t feel his Beta over their mating bond.

Jensen was closing in on himself. So much so that he had put up a proverbial brick wall that cut off their connection. It was like a vital piece of the Alpha was missing, and he never realized how much he’d come to count on that little intangible thread that tethered him to his lover. It was like a really comfortable blanket of security that Jared didn’t know he depended on, until it was taken away from him.

Nevertheless, he reached out with his mind, touching tendrils of love to Jensen’s mental block. Feelings of adoration and fear and understanding and respect and regret and admiration. It was a plea and a promise all at once; a plea for forgiveness and a promise that they would fix anything, everything, together.

Jensen was frozen in place, his chest heaving the only real indication that he was feeling the emotions Jared was telegraphing. Slowly, the Alpha began moving forward again, stopping tentatively in front of his mate.

“We were both wrong, Jen,” he murmured roughly, bringing his hand up to press his palm against Jensen’s sternum, just above his heart. It was beating against his palm as fast as a mockingbird’s wings. “But you can’t give up on me, love. You can’t make me lose you.” Jensen looked up at him, and Jared could almost see the cracks in his mate’s armor. He pushed one last time. “You promised me, love. You said that you were going to remember. You said that you weren’t going to become something you thought you needed to be, and let go of who you actually are.” Jared brought the hand not resting over Jensen’s heart to cup his mate’s face, long fingers spanning a sharp jaw and slender throat. “You promised you wouldn’t…I made a mistake, earlier, but love…please don’t leave me.”

Jared waited for a few tense moments that seemed more like years, while JR seemed to be considering his words.

The Alpha’s relief couldn’t be measured when Jensen released a small, pained sigh, staggering forward and slumping against him, hands twining determinedly into Jared’s shirt.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” his mate was whispering, voice small and tired. “Please don’t hate me.”

“I could never hate you, baby,” Jared refuted in a fierce murmur, yanking Jensen in closer. “Don’t ever think that. I love you so much. I’m sorry too, love, I’m so damn sorry.”

The Alpha tightened his grip as his Beta began to shiver in his arms. This was the first time that Jensen had ever really lost control with him; the first time that his beautiful mate had shattered and trusted him to put the pieces back together.
As badly as it had come about, some small part of Jared was grateful it had happened. With everything that was going on, Jensen needed the kind of soul cleansing that only crying could give, despite the fact that his mate had never really accepted as much.

Katherine was watching them quietly, something indefinable in her eyes. She wasn’t saying anything – perhaps realizing that Jared was effectively saving her from torture – but Jared’s Alpha rebelled against the notion of her being privy to his Beta’s emotions. Moving steadily, he herded Jensen back up the stairs, never letting much space come between them as he did.

He knew Chris would have followed him here, and his suspicions were confirmed when Kane came into view. His pained blue eyes were fixed on Jensen’s trembling form, and for once, Jen wasn’t cognizant of the eyes that were on him. His face was buried in Jared’s chest, and as much as Jared definitely didn’t mind that, he felt badly for Chris, knowing that the alpha was hurting for the pain his best friend was going through.

Beaver showed up out of nowhere, a glass of iced water in hand. The Chemistry professor also looked troubled, in a way that Jared had never really seen before.

Until right then, Jared never really noticed just how much his mate’s unwavering strength affected everyone around them. Almost everyone in their pack, it seemed, drew from the unyielding confidence and determination Jensen exuded, and Jared’s Alpha rumbled territorially once he realized that he was the only person Jensen could truly fall apart with.

Of course, it made him feel like more of an idiot for walking away from Jensen earlier, but then there was nothing to be said for his base instincts.

Slowly, Jensen retracted from his hold, unhooking his death grip on Jared’s shirt at the same time, reaching down for his hand instead. There was a damp spot on Jared’s chest, from Jensen’s tears, and it broke his heart when his Beta mopped at his face, only for more tears to escape his beautiful eyes.

Jensen accepted the glass of water with a small smile – the ghost of the smile that could light up Jared’s world – and drank deeply. “Thank you, Sir,” he croaked, clearing his throat to try to get rid of the thick tenor of his voice. He raised red rimmed eyes to look at each of them in turn. “I’m sorry,” he apologized again, his voice gruff. “This was…” his voice caught despite his best intentions. “I’m just sorry,” he finally whispered, voice smaller than Jared could remember hearing it. “I’m so sorry.”

Jared felt like there should be a limit on how often he could feel his heart break in his chest.

He reached around Jensen, pulling him into the firm cage of his arms. Jensen leaned against him, eyes fluttering closed as he took in steadying breaths.

To everyone’s surprise, it was Beaver that spoke up first.

“Well I’ll be the first to say it, I’ll be glad when that broad stops being my unwilling house guest,” he huffed gruffly.

The surprised, hard little laugh that fell from Jensen’s lips warmed Jared’s insides. He knew they were far from okay; knew that they needed a lot to recover from this round. But if Jensen could still muster up a laugh for their Chemistry professor and pseudo-uncle…

…he had a feeling that they might just be okay.
To date, silence had always been a friend of Jensen’s.

It was a blanket that he could wrap himself in, that meant that there was no more yelled accusations and scathing insults being directed at him. It was a time when he could listen to his own thoughts, ruminate over the world in a way that he normally never allowed himself to. All told, Jensen kind of really liked the silence.

At least, he had, until it had so viciously turned against him.

Jensen sat in front of Jared, Chris and Chad, in Jared’s cottage, having just filled them in on the highlights of the years preceding Eric’s decision to change his ways. They were all quiet – in sound, at least. Jensen’s mind observed their other tells easily enough.

The tightening in Chris’ jaw and the pulse that kept jumping in his throat, indicative of the explosive anger inside him.

Chad’s constant flexing of his fists and the agitated bounce of his leg against the wooden floor that told Jensen just how much he wanted to be hunting Eric down.

And Jared’s complete lack of movement, in Jensen’s understanding, spoke volumes more about his mindset than any number of actions could have. He figured that his Alpha only really shut down like that when he needed every single iota of his control to keep from killing people. As it was, Jared was reigning in every protective Alpha instinct he had, and in an effort to show his gratitude, Jensen leaned towards him and curled their hands together.

Jared sent him a small smile back, gripping his hand like Jensen was a lifeline, or maybe like Jared was trying to be one – Jensen couldn’t tell.

“I don’t understand why you won’t just let us kill him.”

The petulance in Chris’ voice eased a few notches off Jensen’s tension. Childish indignation, he could handle, but the fury of three alpha wolves? Not so much.

“I’ve gotten a lot of second chances in my life,” Jensen spoke quietly, stunning himself with the ease with which he could answer that. “A second chance at a family when I was a baby. A second chance with my brothers, when I got you and Chad, and when Josh found me.” He squeezed Jared’s hand, keeping his eyes on Chris. “A second chance at almost everything, the moment I met Jared – life, hope, love, happiness… I had to take the second chance at having my foster father back. I owed it to my parents, and to my foster mother to give Eric a second chance, too. He’s really been trying recently.”

A small sigh escaped his lips. “Look,” Jensen levelled with them, “for a long time, I was sure that college was going to be my only way out. I was sure that I was never going to have the relationship with Eric that I used to have when I was a kid. But then he actually started making an effort, and I’m not so naïve that I think a couple texts and family dinners at home would make everything alright… but it was a start. It was a commitment to making things okay again. We were never going to be the fucking Brady Bunch, but… we’re both trying to be a family. The kind of family my foster mom always wanted us to be. The kind of family we were, when she was alive.”

Jared’s arms found their way around him, one corded arm across his chest and the other around his waist, pulling him into his Alpha’s strong, firm chest. He leaned back into it, savoring the feelings of
comfort and safety that he thought was gone forever.

“If something happens, I’ll deal with it,” he added softly. “But I would never be able to live with myself if I didn’t give this a shot. If I was always going to be wondering whether we could have learned to adjust or not.”

His friends descended once more into that silence. Jensen wrapped both hands around Jared’s forearm, which was pressing into his chest, and decided to make use of the quiet to align his own thoughts.

He had never been as close to the brink as he’d been when he was holding that knife to Katherine’s throat. Jensen was known for his legendary control, and even in the toughest of situations, he’d held his wits about him. But the moment that Jared walked away from him and all his old insecurities came bowling him over? It was the quickest, cleanest break he’d ever experienced.

It terrified him, how much of a tether Jared had become to him. The one thing solid in his life, which was keeping him from losing his humanity. More specifically, Jensen was scared that he’d allowed himself to give in to his biggest weakness.

And JR was his biggest weakness, just as much as the persona was his greatest strength. It was the part of himself that allowed him to detach from situations to keep from being emotionally compromised, but it was also the part of him that dulled his moral compass. It was the part of him that could spot patterns and unravel people’s psyche with the best of shrinks, but it was also the part of him that could strike at the most vulnerable places that could shatter an already fragile psyche in order to get answers.

Since he started honing those scary skills, he’d known the dangers that came with it. Aldis and Matt had never allowed him to partake in the skeeviest of deals because of it – because they’d never wanted to allow him to fully expend those abilities and be tempted to see how far he could take them. They had known, even then, that Jensen didn’t want to become that type of person. It would have been easy…God knew, after every beating, every insult and every hurt, that it would have been so fucking easy to let go. To fall into a state of malicious detachment.

But he couldn’t. He’d promised himself a long time ago that he wouldn’t.

And yet he almost had.

Jensen shuddered to think about the implications of crossing that line, if Jared had been a little later than he had been. To anyone else, it may not have seemed like much. What was a few little threats in the face of getting answers that would protect an entire pack of Werewolves that were like family to him?

But it was more than that. It would have marked him becoming nothing better than Adam, nothing better than an inebriated Eric. He would have become everything he’d learned to fear. And it would have destroyed him. Maybe not immediately, but it would have, spectacularly no less.

“You won’t let us kill your foster dad,” Chad groused, breaking the silence and his train of thought, “and you won’t let us kill your abusive bastard of an ex, either. Jeeze, Green Eyes, you ever heard of compromise?”

Jensen saw the nickname as what it was – a reassurance that Chad wasn’t mad at him, too – but the words made him tense nonetheless. He straightened up, so that he could face Jared too. “Speaking of abusive exes…” he bit his bottom lip, suddenly afraid to tell Jared his newest intel. “Aldis called me last night.” He huffed a little in disbelief; that party, and all that happiness, hardly seemed like it was
just a few hours ago. It felt like a lifetime in the past. Barreling past his nerves, Jensen caught his Alpha’s eyes. “Apparently Adam has been asking around about me. There’s nothing concrete to worry on just yet, but just so y’all know.”

Chris swore a blue streak, while Chad just clenched his jaw and Jared sported a look of hurt, mixed in with anger and concern.

Jensen simply waited, with bated breath, for Jared’s reaction.

Finally, the Alpha spoke. “We can deal with him easily enough if he even thinks about coming within 50 feet of you,” Jared asserted, a hint of a possessive growl in his voice. “That being said… we love you guys, but Chris, Chad – goodnight. We’ll see you tomorrow. I need some time with Jensen now.”

Something in Jared’s voice – Jensen couldn’t pinpoint what – was apparently a game-changer. Chris and Chad left, both without (much) complaint, and both giving him a fierce hug before they did. Apprehension coiled deep in Jensen’s belly.

Jared had come back, sure…but was it just to save him? Did his Alpha finally decide he’d had enough of Jensen’s drama? Was this the part where Jared let him off easy before riding into the sunset with someone far more capable than Jensen at his side?

Jensen’s chest compressed at the thought, but he readied himself for the blow.

There was no way he was going to hold Jared back if he needed to let go. He just hoped he’d be strong enough to hold out until his amazing Alpha left.

~*Jared*~

His stunning mate, his beautiful Beta, looked like he was bracing himself for a knife.

And hurt more than Jared could describe exploded inside him.

That, combined with the clear fear and hesitation Jensen had, telling him about Adam, told Jared everything he needed to know about how badly he messed up earlier. How badly he’d hurt his mate. That was something he had to fix, right the fuck now.

With utmost care, he gathered Jensen’s hand in his own, turning around to lead his mate upstairs and into – what he’d come to think of as – their bedroom. Jensen was tense and quiet the whole way, making Jared nervous and wondering whether he’d taken things too far today.

Could Jensen forgive him for leaving when his mate needed him most? Or was this the part where Jensen gave up on his consistent struggle with his protective instincts? Decided he’d had enough of trying to deal with Jared’s freak-outs over and above his own worries?

The thought itself made Jared shudder.

He had to trust that the love they had, was stronger than his insecurities and Jensen’s combined.

It was easier to do that, than he thought it would be.

With gentle firmness, he led Jen to their bed, directing him to lie in the middle of the bed without
needing to use his words. His mate’s body was still a rigid line along their bed, but Jared was aiming to change that.

Not giving his Beta the chance to protest, Jared angled himself to lie over Jensen, every inch of their body in contact even as he used his forearms to brace his full weight. Wide green eyes blinked owlishly at him, giving him the first glimpse of the fear that was churning through his lover.

All at once, it wasn’t difficult for him to figure out what he needed to say.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” he murmured, his eyes fluttering closed with the sheer force of his regret. He pressed his forehead against Jensen’s, a tremble rocking through his body. “I’m sorry I left, I’m sorry I made you think that I wouldn’t be back, I’m sorry that I didn’t push aside my instincts long enough to tell you that my anger wasn’t at you… I’m sorry for handling this all wrong, when you’ve handled all my secrets and burdens so fucking effortlessly.” He choked a bitter laugh, not opening his eyes. “I don’t know how you do it, love. I don’t know how you hold this mantle so damn well. How you keep all this from smothering you, and still find it in you to reassure and be there for everyone else. I’m so fucking sorry I couldn’t do that for you when you needed me to. I’ll never forgive myself for…”

“Jay, stop.” Jensen’s choked voice was thick. “Open your eyes, Alpha,” he whispered softly. Jared felt a thrum of anticipation spike in his chest as he slowly followed the command. Brilliant green eyes stared back at him, shining with a sheen of unshed tears. “You came back,” Jensen murmured. “There’s nothing for me to forgive you for. Do you forgive me for being too afraid to tell you? Not afraid of you,” he hastened to clarify. “Afraid that the truth might prove me incompetent to be your mate.”

“Every single moment, of every single day,” Jared whispered roughly, “you show me beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’m the luckiest Alpha in the world, to have such a strong and capable mate by my side.” Jared leaned down to nuzzle at his mate’s throat, biting gently at some of the fading marks that decorated Jensen’s skin, broadcasting his claim. “Never be afraid of me, love,” he pleaded, almost inaudibly, as he mouthed along the silky skin, up Jensen’s jaw. “Never be afraid of telling me things,” he elaborated, whispering the words into his mate’s ear as he nibbled on the soft flesh of his ear lobe. “It nearly killed me to see how scared you were to tell me about Aldis’ call. I never want you to look like that again. I need you to remember that you can tell me anything, and I’ll never ever take it out on you. On us. You might have to deal with my Alpha over protectiveness, but I swear that you never have to be worried that I’ll leave, baby. Never. I’d never - could never - leave you.”

Jensen’s breath was coming out in breathy gasps and whimpers as he leaned eagerly into Jared’s kisses. He continued his ministrations along Jensen’s neck, across his collarbone and around the soft swell of his shoulder, which was the furthest his shirt would stretch until.

There was still something blatantly missing though, like a vital part of Jared.

Their mating bond.

“Jensen, love,” he panted softly, feeling like his skin was too tight, too hot. He needed to reclaim his mate, starting with their connection that Jared didn’t know he’d come to depend on so fiercely.

“Baby, I need you to…” the words were stuck in his throat as pleasure and need fogged his senses.

“Tell me, Jay,” Jensen pleaded, arching up into him slightly.

“I need you to let me in, baby. I need you to let me feel you again. Our bond, Jen…” he sucked deeply on the skin above Jensen’s pulse point before continuing. “You shut me out when we fought
earlier. You created some kind of wall when you retreated into yourself, so that I can’t feel you through our telepathic connection anymore. Driving me crazy, baby,” he husked throatily, swiveling his hips to grind his denim-covered cock over Jensen’s. “Need to feel you, love. Need to feel your soul touching mine.”

Jensen caught his eyes, hands tangling in his hair and rubbing soothingly. “I never realized,” he whispered, loosening the fist of anxiety in Jared’s chest that he hadn’t consciously noticed was there since losing the connection. “I didn’t mean to.”

With the unspoken apology, Jensen’s muscles uncoiled, and slowly but surely, the first spark of feeling permeated Jared’s body. He sagged a little, with the force of his pent-up sigh of relief; it was like having a small part of himself throbbing in pain, and it finally being healed.

They exchanged languid kisses until eventually, they were both laying themselves bare to one another, just like they did the first time they mated, except slightly stronger for the trials they’d overcome since then. Clothes melted under their fingertips and it wasn’t long before Jared was three fingers deep into his hot, sweat-slick mate.

“Just like that, baby,” he growled when Jensen arched up with a wanton cry as Jared stroked his prostate. “You moan so pretty for me. Lemme hear you, Jen. Wanna hear you fall apart.”

“Jesus, fuck, Jay…” Jensen whimpered, clutching uselessly at Jared’s biceps. “Fuck me, take me, come on Alpha…need you inside me.”

“Fuck…yeah, Jen,” he mumbled, out of his mind with the need to claim and possess. “Yeah, okay.”

Pushing into his Beta’s tight hole, it was all Jared could do not to come from the sweet pressure around his dick. He mouthed clumsily along Jensen’s abdomen as he slid in, sucking little bruises all along his body to the gorgeous sounds of Jensen begging him to go faster.

When finally he was fully enveloped in his mate, Jared pulled back just enough to look Jensen in the eyes.

“I love you,” he whispered, his voice a low and fervent promise. “More than the moon and the stars.”

~*Jensen*~

For the first time since waking up his Alpha’s arms, Jensen felt a real smile tug at his lips. Jared speaking those words, he knew, was a promise that they were okay. That they would be okay.

And damn if he didn’t know exactly how to respond.

“I love you too, Jay,” he murmured, his feelings for his Alpha almost overwhelming him. “Forever and always.”

Jared leaned down to press a kiss to his lips at the same time that his hips began to thrust gently into him, creating a rhythm all their own. Jensen gasped into his mate’s mouth, trying to rock downwards and urge Jared into a faster pace.

Maybe it was Jared’s Alpha need to claim him, or maybe Jared was just perfectly in tune with
Jensen, but in the next moment, Jared drove into him with a sharp jerk, drawing a punched out gasp from Jensen’s mouth. Jared pistoned his hips, fucking owning Jensen with each drag of his cock against the green eyed boy’s tender rim.

“Ngh, Jay, please…” he moaned loudly, his head thrown back in pleasure. He didn’t even know what he was begging for as he held on to Jared’s shoulders, tightening his legs around Jared’s waist. When Jared roughly stripped his throbbing member, it was like an electric shock of pleasure and after a few determined strokes, Jensen arched his back almost off the bed with the force of his orgasm slamming into him.

Loose-limbed after his release and accustomed to his Alpha’s body, it wasn’t long before Jared’s knot pushed into him, stretching him even tighter. After a few thrusts, Jared was coming hard, splashing Jensen’s insides white as the Alpha bit sloppily at his throat to muffle his groan.

Jared collapsed carefully next to him, manhandling their connected bodies tenderly until he was spooning Jensen, the way they normally slept. Jared slotted one leg in between his, wrapped one arm around his waist and the other across his chest, and curled around Jensen until a piece of paper couldn’t have fit between their sweaty bodies. His Alpha assaulted his neck and shoulder with soft little nips and suckles as they both basked in the afterglow.

“Don’t ever want to not feel you again,” Jared growled, his tone an interesting mix of possessive Alpha and scared lover. “Don’t ever want to lose our connection.”

Jensen simply snuggled back, impossibly closer. Here, wrapped up around Jared and filled to bursting with love and acceptance?

This seemed like the perfect place to forget the world for a little while.

Jensen fell asleep to hot breath puffing against the nape of his neck, and – one of his favorite feelings – the feel of Jared’s heartbeat against his back.

~*Jared*~

*ThumpThumpThump.*

Apparently, the world didn’t get the memo that they were forgetting it for the night.

*ThumpThumpThump.*

Jared blinked awake when the knocking on their door persisted. Jensen sat up, groaning at the dull ache in his ass and the Alpha grumbled incoherently, fumbling around the bedside table until he found his phone.

02:54

“Why the damn hell would anyone be breaking down our door at ass o’clock in the morning?” Jared huffed in annoyance, scowling into his pillow. A thought occurred to him, and he growled unintelligibly. “I’m gonna kill Chad if it’s him.”

Jensen laughed, deep and throaty, and the beautiful sound swept away Jared’s bad mood instantaneously. After the kind of day they’d had yesterday, he almost been afraid that he’d never
hear that amazing sound again – at least, not for a while – and it made his chest burn with happiness.

“Why would it be Chad?” Jensen asked in amused confusion, oblivious to the dazed and star-struck look on Jared’s face as he pulled on his jeans and Jared’s hoodie.

“I don’t know,” Jared shrugged as he dragged himself out of bed and into his own jeans. “When something unexplainable, inappropriate or generally unacceptable happens, we tend to look to Chad first.”

Jensen laughed again, and a soft, silly smile quirked Jared’s lips up. He didn’t resist the urge to pull his beautiful mate into a long kiss, until they were interrupted by pounding on the front door again. This time, it was Jensen who huffed in annoyance, and Jared smirked at him.

As they descended the stairs, Jared motioned for Jensen to stay behind him. His instincts weren’t buzzing with impending danger, but he still wasn’t about to allow Jensen away from his protection until they knew what was behind their door.

Turns out, they didn’t have to wait to find out.

“JR, get your scrawny little ass out here!” Aldis yelled. “Don’t make me call someone to bust the door in.”

Jared exchanged a look with his mate that told him Jensen’s worries were as real as his own. Grabbing his Beta’s hand in his, Jared squeezed reassuringly before opening the door. “Dodge, hey…m’sorry, man, me and Jen were asleep upstairs.”

“I do not need to know what kinky business you two fuckers were getting on,” Aldis rolled his eyes, “but would either of you mind explaining to me why y’all have phones? Because it obviously ain’t for answering calls or returning voice messages,” he groused.

“S’been a long day, Al,” Jensen offered quietly, apologetically, his voice cracking with tiredness. It seemed Aldis Hodge was just as susceptible as the rest of them to Jensen Ackles, as he almost instantly softened.

“You alright, kid?” he asked, voice full of gruff concern as they walked into the living room. “You look like you just went a couple rounds with Hell fire and came out burned.”

Jensen winced and Jared grasped lightly at the nape of his neck, soothing. “Seems just about right,” he mumbled. “What’re you doing out here so late, Al? And how’d you know where to find me?”

Aldis grinned lightly. “Your old buddy, Dean, hacked into some probably confidential places and traced the White Bread’s phone here,” he revealed, and Jared wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or annoyed that he was easily traceable.

“I’m not even gonna start on how much ass I’m gonna kick for invading my boyfriend’s privacy,” Jensen stated dryly, making Jared smile. “But that begs the question…why’d you need to track me down so badly?”

Hodge immediately sobered, and it did nothing to inspire relief in the Alpha. “I got wind that the rat bastard-” the bar owner broke his sentence to look at Jared, adding, “-that’s our personal nickname for one Mr. Adam Gilligan, by the way…word on the street is that he put out feelers about you. Everybody knows not to cross JR, so he struck out on that front. Me and the boys went looking for him last night, to have that little…talk with him, but we couldn’t find him. Couple hours later, Spike walks into the bar, tells me that he broke into the jackass’s dorm room.”
“Jesus Christ,” Jensen interrupted, green eyes narrowed with a mixture of concern and reprimand. “I warned Spike about getting mixed up in that shit, he shouldn’t have done that.”

“Not the reason I rode out here, JR,” Aldis reminded them. “Spike said that the place was clean. Half his clothes were cleared out, nothing in the fridge, and no signs that the bed was slept in recently.”

“Adam’s in his first year at college,” Jensen pointed out, sounding far too calm and sensible for it not to be a façade. “He’s probably crashing at home or out partying.”

“Or maybe he’s here.”

Jared suppressed a growl at the notion that Adam was even remotely near to his mate.

“He doesn’t know anyone here, and nobody outside of Jared and two of my best friends know where I live,” Jensen spoke, forcing his voice to remain level and reasonable. “Even if he is here, he ain’t finding me.”

“You have to prepare for the worst case scenario, J-Ross,” Aldis instructed. “That way…”

“…no one will be able to take me by surprise and attack my blind side,” Jensen finished dutifully. “I know, Al. You taught me well. But you also taught me not to jump to any conclusions and to keep a clear mind on me. I can’t do that if I’m panicking about ifs, maybes and possibilities.”

“But you can’t do it with your head in the sand, either, Kid,” Hodge nudged Jensen’s knee gently. “Look, I’m gonna stick around for a couple days, just in case you need some backup.”

Jensen smiled wearily, and Jared was sad to see the tension already coiling his mate’s muscles. “You don’t have to do that, man,” Jen assured the bar owner absentmindedly. “I’ll be safe, as long as I’m with Jared.”

It did some crazy things to the Alpha’s heart, the way Jensen spoke without even thinking, so sure of Jared’s ability to keep him safe.

“You sure kid?”

Jared watched as his mate had a silent conversation with the man, the action taking on some understanding with the knowledge that Aldis had been something of a mentor to Jensen. After a few moments, Aldis stood, holding out his hand and smiling at Jared with something that looked an awful lot like approval.

“I didn’t realize this when I first met you,” Dodge nodded as Jared clasped his hand, “but you’re obviously a huge part of the reason my boy here’s happy. And okay. Thanks for looking out for him, keeping him safe.”

Jared felt warmth flood his chest and he smiled. “Thanks for keeping him safe until I could find him,” he returned, trying to convey his serious gratitude to the older man through his eyes.

Jensen groaned audibly. “Fuck my life, I’m not a fucking teenage girl taking her boyfriend to meet her father for the first time,” he griped, getting up with a huff and heading for their unofficial guest room. “You’re bunking here tonight, Hodge,” he threw over his shoulder as he walked. “No way I’m letting you ride home, and if I remember right, there is some nasty stuff in motel rooms.”

Jared laughed with Dodge as Jensen imitated the older man’s voice, using the words he’d spoken to them the night he’d convinced them to bunk at his place.
“Jen’s right, man,” he added with a smile. “No way are you not bunking with us, especially after you rode all the way out here to get the message to us.”

“Y’all better not get up to any funny business while I’m here,” the bar owner spoke loudly, and judging from the mirth in his eyes, Jared concluded that the words were more a jibe at Jensen than an actual warning.

His suspicions were confirmed when, a beat later, Jensen’s muffled voice came across. “Fuck off, Hodge.”

Aldis laughed, shaking his head, before turning back to Jared. “I didn’t get to do this before you left,” he said mildly, a serious note entering his tone, “but just for the benefit of the record, I’ll break your pretty little face if you break his heart.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jared nodded with a grin. “For that same record, I shouldn’t tell Jen about this conversation, right?”

Hodge snorted indelicately. “Fuck no. I like all my bits and pieces exactly where they are, thank you very much, White Bread.”

Jared coughed to hide his chuckles as Jensen walked back into the room. His mate raised an eyebrow at him, obviously not convinced, and Jared wondered what kind of distractions he could make use of to get out of his lover’s questions.

“Bed’s made. You need sweats?”

Aldis shook his head in response to the question. “Nah man, I had enough forethought to pack.” Slinging his bag across his shoulder, the older man smirked wolfishly at Jensen. “Seriously man, I don’t wanna hear nothin’. There are some things I’d never like to know about my little brother,” he teased, ruffling Jensen’s hair. “And that includes knowing what goes on behind his closed doors.”

Jensen smirked, but before he could retort, his face suddenly paled and a small breath of air punched violently out of his body. He swayed on his feet, looking sick.

Ice coated Jared’s insides and he was next to his mate in a second, steadying arms around him. “Jen, baby, what’s wrong?”

Wide, horrified eyes met his own. “She shouldn’t have known,” his mate mouthed. “Jared…how did she know?” Shaking his head, Jensen pushed away from him, urgency taking over his features. “We need to go, Jay, right the fuck now.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Hope I didn’t completely blow this chapter - there was a lot that I was fretting over! Especially since I didn’t actually plan to add smut to this chapter! Hope y’all enjoyed!!

Much love! <3
Beta...And Then Some

Chapter Notes

Whoo! I'm totally making up for my absence with another looong chapter! ;-)  
Shoutout to frostedgoddess and jodiebeth, who figured out where I was going with this chapter!!  
Thanks to all my most amazing and fantastic readers; so much love for you guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

He hadn’t been this angry with himself in a long time.

“Baby, you’re gonna have to elaborate for me,” Jared interrupted his train of thought. His Alpha was pulling on his sneakers, the keys to the Impala already dangling from his fingers. “You know I’m going with you on this, but I need to understand what you’re seeing.”

Jensen blinked, forcing himself to calm down. “Yeah,” he finally managed to nod, shuddering out a breath. “Yeah, okay, I’ll explain in the car.” He turned to face the confused face of his old mentor. “You’ll hold down the fort, Hodge?” he asked, even as he knew the answer.

Like he predicted, he was answered with a swift nod. “You got it, man, whatever you need.”

He gave Aldis a rough, one-armed hug in response, before jamming his feet into his own shoes and following Jared out the door. As soon as the Impala roared to life, Jared spoke.

“This has something to do with Katherine.” The Alpha’s words were more of a statement than a question.

“Yeah,” he answered anyway, resisting the urge to put his fist through something solid. “How did she know, Jay?” he asked, his voice frustrated. “She brought up Eric abusing me, knowing that it would throw me for a loop and counting on me being blindsided enough that I wouldn’t realize – and I didn’t! – that she had no business knowing that.” He fixed his gaze on his lover’s, watching as comprehension dawned on Jared’s face.

“She shouldn’t have known about the abuse,” he breathed. “Not unless she was watching you.”

He nodded jerkily. “Not unless she was watching me.”

“But if she was watching you for a long time, why did she wait to try to kill you?”

“I don’t know, Jay,” he admitted in a low voice, shoving his hand almost violently through his dirty-blonde spikes. “I don’t know.” He waited a moment, trying to ride out the explosive, inwardly directed fury in his bones, to no avail. “God damnit!” he cursed viciously, interlocking his fingers and bringing his linked hands to the back of his neck, knowing that it was the only way he wasn’t
going to hit Jared’s beautiful Impala. He leaned forward, his head dropping between his arms. “I
can’t believe I didn’t pick up on that, I can’t believe I let my emotions get the better of me.”

“Stop it, baby,” Jared’s strong voice interrupted his self-recrimination. “Don’t do that, don’t blame
yourself for that.” One big hand wrapped around his, where his clasped fists were pressing against
the nape of his neck.

Keeping his eyes shut tightly, he blindly groped until his fingers messily latched with Jared’s. “Déjà
vu, Jay,” he bit off, trusting Jared to know that his tone was directed at himself and not the Alpha.
“This is the second time that I missed something so vital. The second time that JR didn’t immediately
pick up on a discrepancy because I was busy angsting over something that I should have been able to
push to the back of my mind.” He huffed out an agitated sigh. “I got softer than I realized.”

“Good,” Jared stressed promptly, squeezing his fingers and holding on, despite how awkward it must
have been to be driving with one hand. “You don’t need to be JR anymore. You shouldn’t have had
to be him since you came here. You chose us over him.”

“Yeah, well…if I had been him, then we probably wouldn’t be on the damn back foot all the time.”

“And I wouldn’t have gotten to know my beautiful, amazing, incredible Beta,” his lover pointed out
without hesitation. “Besides,” Jared huffed a mirthless laugh, “you basically helped engineer your
own rescue by figuring out where they were keeping you when you got taken. You protected the
pack’s pups with your own life that day in the clearing. Hell, you saved my entire pack – my home –
the day you figured out Morgan’s plans to ambush us!! I’d hardly call that a ‘back foot’, love.”

With each reassurance, Jensen managed to grasp an admittedly tenuous hold on calm. He
straightened slowly, bringing his and Jared’s hands forward to rest on his knee.

“You know,” he cleared his throat, voice turning softer with affection, “you were the one who
figured out how to reach me telepathically when I was taken. The love you have for your pack was
with me by association, and I knew I had to protect Luke and his brother and sister. And you kept
me calm enough, the day of the ambush and today, to keep a level head and see what I wasn’t
seeing.” Without looking up, he brought Jared’s knuckles to his lips for a brief kiss. “You make me
better, without making me JR. The only reason we’re not two steps behind is because you’re always
there for me to keep me sharp. I definitely chose right.”

“It’s true we make a kickass team, baby.” Jensen could hear Jared’s wolfish grin in his tone. “You’re
the brains, I’m the brawn.”

A surprised laugh bubbled through his chest, and he finally picked his head up to look at his Alpha’s
smiling face. “I could so take your ass in a fight, Padalecki.”

“Maybe as a human,” Jared allowed cheerfully, “but you still wouldn’t. We both love you bottoming
too much.”

Jensen chuckled at the blatant, playful leer the Alpha was aiming at him. “Fair enough, you toppy
bastard.”

“You love it,” Jared shot back dismissively.

“I do,” Jensen admitted brazenly. “Hey,” he smirked, patting the dashboard with a mental apology
for his violent thoughts earlier, “if I’m the brains, and you’re the brawn, that totally makes your
Impala the beauty.”

“Naw,” Jared shot him a look that was equal parts tender and amused, “I love her, but you’re
definitely, exponentially more beautiful than our Impala.”

Jensen’s heart warmed at the correction, a pleasant hum coursing throughout his body that was a lot more relaxing than the fury that came before it. Jared was the only one who could temper his emotions like that, be it with a simple touch of his hand, or the changing of a single pronoun that proclaimed Jared’s car as his own, too.

The unspoken promises for their future together.

“Thank you, Jared,” he whispered, looking at their still joined hands.

“For calling you beautiful?” Jared teased, just as softly.

He smiled at his lover’s pretense of being obtuse. “For bringing out things in me that make me Jensen.” He looked over to find burning hazel eyes glancing intermittently at him. “For reminding me of the man I want to be. The man I think I might never have been if I hadn’t literally fallen into your arms that first day in Chemistry.”

He smirked, expecting a well-timed quip about falling all over his Alpha, so it surprised Jensen when Jared simply smiled, an inexplicably tender look crossing his features.

“I remember thinking,” Jared husked, bringing their hands up to press against his chest, “that nothing else mattered, just as long as I could keep you in my arms forever. I remember thinking that everything suddenly made sense. Like the world had been out of focus and I just then realized it because you showed me what the world could be like.” The Alpha laughed roughly and Jensen felt his eyes burn at the sheer force of the love that was pulsating through their bond. “I also remember thinking that I was going crazy,” the Alpha admitted, wrinkling his nose around his smile. “But figuring that again, that was totally okay, if it meant I didn’t have to let you go.”

“Jesus,” Jensen laughed slightly, his voice shaky with repressed emotion, “I feel like I have the emotional range of a centipede. I just remember being torn between mortified that I tripped into the hottest guy in class, and annoyed that Fate seemed to take pleasure in my pain.” Jared chuckled in amusement and the sound struck Jensen’s heart in the way only Jared’s happiness could. “I guess anything could happen, though,” he reflected thoughtfully, “and I still could never complain. If Fate brought me you, then no amount of bad karma could measure up to the good that you bring to my life. Makes up for everything that had to come before you, and anything that’s going to come after you, as long as it means having you in my life.”

“Emotional range of a centipede, he says,” Jared teased, shooting him a soft smile.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Jensen had to ask. “How do you know exactly how to calm me down when I’m on the brink of losing it completely?”

“The same way that you know how to calm my Alpha instincts, I guess,” Jared shrugged. “We’re two parts of a whole. We complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses.”

He nodded slowly, taking in his Alpha’s words. “Well then,” he murmured, “how do you want to handle this?”

Jensen felt the phantom feel of gratitude over their bond and knew instantly that he’d made the decision in asking.

“No more JR,” Jared answered immediately, firmly. “I hate what it does to you.”

“Okay,” Jensen agreed easily, welcoming the twinge of relief in his chest. “Honestly, I’m not so sure
how much more she would respond to that, anyway. Not now that she’s had a chance to compose herself again.”

“Well we do know something she never expected us to pick up on,” the Padalecki heir pointed out. “Can’t we just blindside her with that and hope she cracks?”

“Sure, but what do we do in the event of that backfiring?” he asked pragmatically. “Because at this point, shooting blind has fifty-fifty odds, at best. We’d be screwed if that was our only play.”

“That seems just about right,” Jared allowed reluctantly, nodding his head.

Jensen ran his tongue over his teeth, casting his eyes speculatively over the dark surroundings that they were quickly passing. “The problem is that we have no bargaining chips. We have nothing that she wants, except maybe my head and a silver platter.”

“We have the humanizing serum,” the Alpha pointed out quietly. “She wants to stay Were so badly. What if we offer her that in exchange for information?”

A hint of amusement quirked Jensen’s lips up. “You’ve been watching too many procedural cop shows, Jay,” he mocked playfully. “We’re not offering her a ‘plea bargain’. For one thing, there is way too much damage she could do if she stays a Were – damage that might be detrimental to the pack, no less – and for another thing, I’m not going back on her punishment. That was Chris’ decision to make, his closure to gain. I can’t take that away from him.”

Jared huffed childishly. “I don’t know about you, Jen, but I’m not seeing that many other options here,” he groused. “And I don’t watch too many cop shows,” he added petulantly.

Jensen snickered, leaning over to press an apologetic kiss to Jared’s shoulder, exposed by his wifebeater. “The only uncertain thing in her future right now, is her impending new life as a human,” he bit his lower lip contemplatively. “Maybe she’s scared about that. Maybe we could offer her some form of a start-up to her life as a human.”

“I’m still not sure we should be letting her go, even as a human,” Jared argued sensibly. “She could be just as much of a threat as a human. What stops her from attacking the pack – or you – at a later date, once she’s recovered?”

“History,” Jensen answered absently, forgetting that Jared didn’t know about his trump card. “Specifically, her own. When Josh showed up and dropped the bomb that Katherine was officially dead for the past nine years, I called Dean up and asked him to make up a dossier for me, on her life and more to the point, her death. I asked him to keep it on ice for me. When she turns human, we give her an ultimatum; leave forever, or get delivered to an asylum, far, far away, along with that file. She won’t be able to explain it, so her choices basically amount to a life away from us, or four padded white walls for the rest of her natural life.”

Jensen was met with silence from his Alpha, and after a moment, he turned to see the owlish look on Jared’s face.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side, baby.”

Jensen snorted. “I’d never have you institutionalized, Jay,” he denied flippantly. “I’d just withhold sex. For a really long time.”

Jared shuddered dramatically. “I repeat; remind me never to get on your bad side.” The Alpha grinned suddenly. “Although I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t a little hot to see your evil villain side.”
Jensen rolled his eyes indulgently. “All I need is the cape and the woefully inappropriate pet with an affectionate streak and a propensity for sitting on my shoulder.”

“So,” Jared smirked, “a cape, and little Lukas in his wolf form, then?”

That surprised a full-on laugh from Jensen, his head thrown back in amusement as he faced the undeniable parallel. Even after all the time that had passed since that day in the clearing, Luke’s favorite place was atop his shoulder, and Jensen still hadn’t found it in his heart to stop the pup from settling there.

“Luke in his wolf form,” he agreed, his eyes warm. “I really need to have a talk with that kid.”

“Need to,” Jared agreed glibly, “but we both know that it’s not gonna happen.”

Jensen cringed his acceptance. “Probably not.”

He tensed as they turned on to Beaver’s street, letting go of the temporary levity with a calm, measured breath and centering himself for what they needed to do. Jared squeezed his hand in silent support, leaving him to this thoughts as he steered the Impala with effortless ease.

No amount of preparation could have readied him for the sight that met their eyes when they pulled up in front of Jim’s house.

As soon as he saw all the lights on at Beaver’s place, and Gerald Padalecki’s Jeep parked outside, Jensen knew that somehow the shit had hit the fan. Judging from the intake of breath from his mate, Jared had figured out as much too.

He was out of the car even before Jared had stopped completely, and it was purely for the sake of unity that he stopped long enough for Jared to catch up with him at the bottom of the porch. The Alpha wordlessly grabbed his hand, a show of support, and linked their fingers before walking up the porch steps. Rapping sharply on the door, Jensen felt something ominous strike him deeply at the look on Jared’s face.

The look on Beaver’s face when he opened the door already confirmed Jensen’s suspicions, without the man needing to say a word.

“Get inside,” Jim ordered them gruffly. He allowed Jared to lead the way, taking a moment to inhale deeply and try to identify the tangy smell that was permeating the air.

“Boys.” Jensen blinked, coming back to the present as the Alpha addressed them both, confusion on his face. “What are you doing here this late? How did you find out?”

That now-familiar sense of impending doom draped over him. “Find out what, Sir?” he asked in a level voice.

Comprehension dawned a moment too late, and Jensen was glad when resignation came over the Senior Padalecki’s face. He was not in the mood to split straws.

“Earlier on,” Gerald explained almost gently, “we didn’t think much of leaving the chair that we had in the basement. We underestimated your Aunt’s will to remain Were…”

Jensen swallowed, praying that his worst assumption was wrong, that he wasn’t too late to get the answers that had the power to keep the Padalecki pack safe. “What happened?” he forced the question out through numb lips.
Gerald sighed, fixing him with a sympathetic look. “She broke the leg of the chair and used the jagged end to slit her wrists. She’s gone.”

~*Jared*~

He had smelled the copious amount of blood coming in, but he had dared to hope that the outcome wasn’t what he feared it was.

And yet.

Jensen expelled his breath in a whoosh, as though someone had sucker punched him, and Jared ached for the phantom feelings that were racing through his mate’s body, going too fast for him to even identify. Everything was quiet for a moment, before Jensen turned around and walked out, without looking back.

Jared watched him sit heavily on the porch stairs, resisting the urge to go over and instead giving his mate some space.

“I heard about what transpired earlier,” his father’s voice brought Jared back to attention. “With Jensen and you, and with Jensen and his Aunt.”

The Alpha heir nodded tiredly, leaning against his father when a hand grasped his shoulder in comfort. “It’s been one hell of a day, Dad.”

“Is Jensen’s foster father still alive?”

The question didn’t surprise him, nor did Jared for a moment think that his father was asking in jest. As an Alpha, Gerald must have understood the emotions that had bowled him over earlier. This question loosely translated to Is there another body we’re gonna have to deal with tonight?

“Jensen made me promise,” he answered simply.

Gerald only nodded in acceptance, but Jared didn’t miss the relief that loosened his father’s shoulder muscles. “Is he going to be okay?” the current Pack Alpha asked, flicking concerned eyes towards Jensen’s still-prone form.

Instead of answering, Jared turned on his heel and went to his mate, his heart breaking when he noticed that Jensen had curled back into his defeated stance; hands linked at the nape of his neck, back slouched and head almost in between his knees. Occasional tremors rocked the smaller man’s body, and Jared knew instinctively that it wasn’t tears, but rather the multitude of emotions crashing into Jensen spectacularly.

“She would have rather butchered herself,” Jensen spoke eventually, his voice low and rough, “than to become human.”

“Baby, I…”

“How could I have been such an idiot?” Jensen cut off his words, still not looking up at him. “Such a God damned fucking moron!”

Jared felt a stab of pain at the self-recrimination he heard seeping through Jensen’s furious voice.
“Jensen…” he tried for a pleading tone.

“No,” his mate cut him off again, rising to his feet in his agitation and descending the stairs so that he could pace on the ground. “This is all my fault, Jared. If I hadn’t lost my shit earlier, we would have gotten the answers and we would have remembered to remove the chair. If I had just kept a handle on my emotions, then all of this could have been avoided. God damnit!” he spat angrily, shoving his hand through his hair hard enough to hurt.

Seeing his mate in such turmoil made Jared feel like someone had reached into his chest and clutched his heart in an icy fist. “Don’t do this to yourself,” he murmured soothingly, trying to send compassion and understanding and love and support through their bond, which was strained with the force of Jensen’s anguish.

“No, Jay, you don’t get it,” Jensen stressed, his voice sounding thin. “I promised I would get those answers out of her and I couldn’t hold my crap together and now we have no way of finding out the truth!”

“We can figure it out some other way…”

“When?” the green-eyed boy asked wearily. Somehow, the defeated tone was worse than the anger. “When the pack finds themselves in trouble or when someone tries to kill one of us again?”

Jared flinched, trying to figure out why all of this was hitting Jensen as hard as it was. “We’ll figure it out, baby.”

A harsh, choppy breath escaped his mate’s lips and he slipped down on to the stairs again like a marionette with its strings cut. Despair rolled off him in waves, and Jared’s inner Alpha howled at the pain of its Beta.

“Just one thing, Jay,” Jen whispered desperately. “Just one fucking thing I had to do and I blew it to shit.”

“What happened today wasn’t your fault, love,” he denied strongly.

“What might happen in the future because of what happened today, will be my fault,” Jensen returned dully. “You don’t get it, Jay. This was my idea, I was supposed to get the information from her, I was supposed to help protect the pack. You call me your partner, Jay; your Beta. How the hell am I going to be the mate that you need – the mate that you deserve – when I couldn’t do one little thing? How will I ever measure up to enough, as your Beta, if I can’t protect the pack from the dangers that I brought?”

Jared felt like an idiot for not seeing it before.

Jensen’s resolve from the word ‘go’, his willingness to turn to JR in the name of reconnaissance, his stubborn and masochistic determination to get his answers at the cost of himself…

All because he wanted to protect Jared’s pack. Their pack. All in the name of being his Beta, without Jensen even being fully aware of the implications thereof.

“Oh, baby…” Jared trailed off, feeling sick for having missed the obvious.

“I couldn’t do this much for them,” Jensen was whispering, not even acknowledging Jared anymore. “I thought I could do it without losing my cool, and then I would know that I wasn’t completely unequipped and inadequate to be your mate, to be at your side. I messed it up, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…I should have powered through JR, I should have seen the connections sooner…”
Jared was on his knees in front of his mate in a second, gripping Jensen’s face in his hands almost bruisingly. “Shh, baby, stop it,” he murmured, thumbing away the tears he wasn’t sure Jensen even knew he was shedding. He pressed his forehead against his lover’s. “We couldn’t have known. This isn’t your fault.”

“If I had just kept my composure,” Jensen mumbled, shaking his head as much as he could with his face trapped between Jared’s palms, “then we would have had the answers. How am I supposed to measure up to being your mate if all I do is bring harm to your pack? How am I supposed to prove to myself and to the pack that I’m not a wholly inadequate choice as your mate?”

“You already have done.”

Jared glanced up sharply at the sound of his father’s deep voice. He heard Jensen mutter an involuntary curse, standing up quickly and swiping his hands roughly at his cheeks, obviously trying for some composure, while Jared remained slack-jawed and confused.

Probably not his finest moment, but who could really blame him?

It was Jensen’s continued, almost imperceptible trembling that brought him back to the surface. He wrapped a protective arm around his mate, drawing him close to his body and trying to absorb the shivers into himself.

His father sighed lightly, compassion entering his eyes, making him look softer than Jared had seen in a long while. Gerald sat on one of the middle steps, flicking his head in a clear invitation for them to join him. Jared knew an unspoken command when he heard one, and it was only the instinctive knowledge that his father was going to comfort his mate, that allowed Jared to smother his usual, rebellious Alpha tendencies.

He sat two steps down from his dad, pulling Jensen to sit next to him, but positioned between the two Alphas. Pulling his mate back into his chest, Jared hoped he was making the right call. Meeting his father’s eyes over Jensen’s down-turned head, he trusted that the message was clear in his face, despite their inability to mind-speak in human form:

*I’m trusting you with my most treasured mate, Dad. Don’t hurt him.*

~*Jensen*~

Try as he might, Jensen couldn’t stop himself from shaking.

He had never been so bitterly disappointed in himself – so potently furious at himself – before that night. No less than seven different outcomes could’ve happened, if he’d just had the fortitude to steamroll through his issues and keep interrogating his late Aunt.

But he hadn’t. And the key piece to this massive jigsaw puzzle of the last few months, was now dead. And he was about to face the Padalecki Pack Alpha, after his actions all but condemned his pack vulnerable to attack.

He could barely bring himself to look at Gerald.

But Jensen was raised a warrior, in many different aspects. He had failed them all, and he deserved the penance he would have to pay…but he was going to face up and take responsibility like a man,
and that meant looking the Senior Padalecki square in the eyes and accepting whatever came his way.

Only, he hadn’t really counted on seeing empathy in those aforementioned eyes.


“I want you to listen very carefully to me, Jensen.”

He blinked owlishly, still reeling from the lack of anger in the Alpha’s face, before realizing what was being asked of him. Swallowing slowly, he forced himself out of his own thoughts before nodding.

“I’m listening.”

“Jared was right,” were the first words out of Gerald’s mouth. It took Jensen a minute to remember what his lover had been trying to tell him; what he had pointedly ignored in favor of his self-inflicted guilt. “What happened here tonight was not your fault. But what concerns me, is that you think yourself unfit to be the Beta of the Pa…” Gerald stopped abruptly, eyes flicking over Jensen’s shoulder before returning to his. “To be Jared’s Beta,” he amended quickly.

Jensen wondered briefly what the man had been about to say, but his flat disbelief outweighed his curiosity. “You don’t even think I’m fit to be Jared’s Beta,” he mumbled, before he could stop himself.

His eyes widened when he realized what he’d said, a split second before Jared tensed at his back. It seemed the filter between his brain and mouth had been broken with all the night’s drama; just another on the long list of things he had to apologize for.

But then, the Senior Padalecki was just full of surprises.

“Yes,” Gerald chuckled dryly, his voice a mixture of impressed and amused, “I suppose I would have said exactly that, not very long ago. But that’s what I’m trying to say; that notion could not be further from the truth.”

Jensen remained silent, waiting for the punch line and feeling off kilter when it never came.

“Jensen,” the Alpha continued, oblivious to Jen’s stupefaction, “being a Beta isn’t about being able to handle an enemy interrogation. It’s about being able to care for others, over and above oneself. It’s about being able to bring out the best in everyone around. It’s about teaching and perpetuating the idea of family in pack, and being a pillar of strength for that family to turn to. It’s about lending fight to your Alpha, when he finds he’s got little to none left.” Gerald turned to face him, hazel eyes boring into his own. “Over the past few weeks, I’ve seen a lot of things about you that you may not have noticed about yourself. My first indicator was Murray, actually.”

“Chad?” Jared’s voice rumbled through his chest, vibrating against Jensen’s back. The familiarity of the sound and the feeling soothed him enough to keep his attention rapt on the eldest Padalecki.

Gerald smiled wryly. “Yes. He’s something of a second command to Jared, as I’m sure you’ve noticed,” he aimed his words at Jensen, seemingly intent on maintaining eye contact. “Ever since they were pups, I could pinpoint 98% of the trouble they got into as Chad’s fault.” Jensen felt a small smile flickering at the admission. “They were relentless, hardly ever gave us a moment of peace. I used to worry about Chad’s inclination to flippancy. As Jared’s second, he couldn’t have that attitude, and I began to get agitated thinking he might never mature into the role Jared seemed set on giving him. Then,” Gerald nodded at him pointedly, “you came along.”
Jensen felt his face flame, automatically wondering whether Gerald was blaming him or praising him. Judging from the gentle smile still on the Alpha’s face, it was the latter. Still, he didn’t want to take any chances…

“I’m…sorry?” he offered hesitantly.

Both father and son chuckled, and Jared leaned down to nip at the nape of his neck affectionately.

“You came along,” Gerald picked up his story, “and you saw the potential in him that no one outside of Jared had seen before. I don’t know what you did; encouraged him, challenged him, or something; but suddenly, I look at Chad and I see a man slipping into the shoes like he’d been wearing them all this time. He’s still as mischievous as our pups at time, but I continue to watch him grow into his place in our pack like a second pelt. And it isn’t only him that you bring the best out of! For the first time in nine years, I’ve seen Christian interacting in our pack. Accepting us as pack family. I’ve seen Tom feeling comfortable in his beta skin for the first time since presenting as a beta in a family full of alphas. I’ve seen my son become the Alpha that I know I could only ever hope to have been.” Jared tightened his embrace at those words, and Jensen snuggled deeper into his Alpha’s arms, pride in Jared momentarily overlapping his self-recrimination. “Your influence brings out the best in our pack, without you even knowing it.

Don’t deserve the praise. Don’t deserve the adulation. Not really.

“I’m not done.” But apparently, Gerald Padalecki disagreed with his inner voice. “The day you saved our pups…protected them against the lone wolf…that was the day I had to make myself realize how wrong I was. With the most minimal amount of reasons to do so, you put the wellbeing of our pack above that of your own, and that baffled my mind. An action so typical of a Beta, and from a human no less…it defied all my expectations and won even the toughest hearts in our pack.”

Gerald smiled at him, and if Jensen didn’t know any better, he would have sworn there was a hint of affection coloring the Alpha’s eyes.

“I don’t like admitting I’m wrong, little human,” the older man teased, using the endearment without malice, “but I’ve watched my pack begin to look at you and Jared for bravery and calm and direction. I’ve watched some of our elders take comfort in your confidence and competence, I’ve watched our little ones begin to idolize you two, and I’ve watched the entire pack trust you without doubt or hesitation. With all my watching, I’ve come to see that their trust in you is not unfounded, despite what you might think.” Gerald fixed him with an open, respectful look. “Jared is the soul of the Padalecki pack, but Jensen, you have become its heart.”

For the first time in his life, Jensen was rendered speechless. He wished he had, even a semblance of an idea of how to respond to that, but he just…didn’t.

“It’s true, you know,” Jared whispered softly in his ear, pulling him tighter against a broad chest. “You asked me how you could prove that you were equipped to be my mate. Truth is, you did it a long time ago, and all it took was being exactly yourself.” Jensen’s eyes fluttered closed at the feather-light kiss his Alpha pressed into the side of his neck. “My beautiful, incredible mate.”

It was easy to turn halfway and curl into the loving arms that already encircled him. He rested his head in the crook between his Alpha’s shoulder and neck, breathing deeply the unique, woodsy scent that seemed pure Jared.

“Let go, baby,” his lover breathed. “I’ll take care of you, I promise. Just let me be your strength for a little while, until you’ve got yours back.”
That didn’t seem like a hardship at all.

~*Jared*~

He felt more than saw the moment his beloved Jensen had finally relinquished control. Jen slumped in his arms, gripping his t-shirt and scooting closer. Over his head, Jared noticed his father move back into the house, giving them a slice of privacy, and he while he was incredibly grateful his dad managed to staunch Jen’s emotional turmoil, he couldn’t help but be glad for the moment alone with his amazing mate.

Jared wasn’t sure how long they sat wrapped together like that, but he didn’t dare to move until he was sure that the green-eyed artist was asleep in his arms. With practiced movements, he slipped an arm underneath Jensen’s knees and stood up in a fluid motion, barely rocking his mate as he cradled his unconscious form to his chest. The Alpha in him hummed pleasantly at the opportunity to take care of his Beta; trusted only himself to sooth and protect his mate from even the most volatile of enemies inside his head.

He murmured a quiet thanks when his father suddenly appeared at his elbow to open the passenger side door to the Impala. It was easy enough to settle Jen in, his heart warming when his mate snuggled deeper into Jared’s hoodie in sleep. Closing the door as gently as he could, he turned to face his father.

“I’m gonna take him to Chris’,“ he told his father, remembering their cover. “I’ll probably crash there, just in case he wakes up and needs me.”

The Senior Padalecki smiled, a mischievous smirk playing on his lips. “That sounds reasonable,” was all he said, and Jared felt his face burn for the suspicions he knew his father had.

Grinning ruefully, Jared added, “Thanks for everything you said to him, Dad.”

Gerald sobered, nodding his acknowledgement. “Perhaps he’ll believe it more, coming from someone who was once convinced he would fall short.”

“I hope so,” Jared mumbled, his chest twinging with remembered pain at how distraught Jensen had been. “He expects so much from himself, without realizing that he does enough as it is. I don’t want that to destroy him.”

“A Beta’s heart is so full of love for family and pack, that there are no lengths they wouldn’t go to in order to protect them. But it’s the strength of those hearts, stronger than we can imagine, that keeps them going even when we’re sure they’re about to fall apart,” his father told him, a fond smile playing on his lips. “Your mother taught me that a long time ago. It will take a while before you stop worrying; before you begin to trust in that inherent strength your mate has. Until you do, just trust that you are enough to keep him from the danger his own heart poses to him.”

A stubborn lump lodged itself in his throat. It felt good to have his father to lean on, and thinking about what he’d learnt today, he felt all the more grateful for all the years his dad had soothed his fears and encouraged him and protected him.

“Thank you, Dad.”

Like always, his father heard what he couldn’t really bring himself to say, and Jared found himself
being pulled into familiar arms, breathing in the reassuring scent that brought back memories of his childhood.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes, son, but I’m so proud of everything you’ve become.” A smile full of love and warmth greeted him when Jared pulled back. “You go take care of your mate. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Afternoon,” Jared corrected, crossing the car. “I promised Jen I’d help him set up the club in the morning.”

“Don’t you two have school tomorrow?” his father asked, a puzzled frown coming on to his face.

Before Jared could answer, Beaver’s voice came from behind him. “Senior Ditch Day,” the Chemistry professor provided, offering Jared a wan smile. “Couldn’t have come at a better time.”

“Three cheers for senior year traditions,” Jared agreed wholeheartedly.

~*Jensen*~

“Son of a bitch! I give!”

Jensen eased up on the arm he had twisted and pinned against his friend’s back, pulling back from the pin.

He had woken up at the stroke of 5am, dazed and wondering how he managed to get from Beaver’s back to his and Jared’s home. His Alpha was fast asleep, curled around him, and it was safe to assume that Jared had gotten him to bed.

Though he couldn’t have slept for more than an hour, Jensen had been wide awake and thrumming with nervous and angry energy. Not wanting to disturb Jared – who’d had just as rough a night as he had – he climbed carefully out of bed, replacing himself with a pillow for Jared to cuddle, and slipped to his old friend and mentor’s room. Waking Aldis up hadn’t been difficult, since the man was as light a sleeper as Jensen himself was, and with just one look at his face, the bar owner was awake and alert. He hadn’t hesitated to follow Jensen outside; getting up to spar at the crack of dawn had actually been a tradition between the two of them a long time ago; and Jensen had hoped to burn off that excess pent-up frustration.

After pinning Aldis for the umpteenth time, he was a lot closer to Zen than he thought he would be. He offered a hand to his friend, smiling wanly. Hodge accepted the offer and Jensen pulled him to his feet, both of them taking a moment to get their breathing under control.

“You and that God damned leg sweep, man,” his friend complained good-naturedly. “You’re in great form, Kid. You took me out more than twice as many times as you went down.”

Jensen nodded at the compliment, using the back of his hand to wipe off the sweat on his forehead. “Thanks man. One more round?”

Hodge nodded gamely, angling his body into a defensive stance. “Come at me, bro,” he teased with a grin.
Deciding to switch it up a little bit, Jensen circled his friend like a predator, his movements slow and deliberate. He knew that his own patience far outweighed the other man’s, and he was proven right when Hodge waited all of three minutes to launch himself at Jensen.

They exchanged a lightning fast flurry of kicks and punches, all pulled at the last minute to avoid serious damage. The rhythm of the fight pounded through Jensen, made his veins run hot, gave him something other than his failures to focus on. He focused on the movements of Aldis’ body, coordinating his own to attack, defend or evade. For every punch Hode landed on him, Jensen made sure to give three back, and he never allowed himself to be near flipping distance, dancing on the edges of their little circle.

At some point, Aldis redoubled his efforts, realizing that Jensen was playing with him. Thanks to a lot more practice than Hodge, however, Jen had better stamina, and it wasn’t long before the bar owner was tired enough to make sloppy mistakes.

Deciding that the sun was becoming too strong for them to be out much longer – without the risk of Jensen’s freckles exploding across his skin – he took the next opening he saw. Ducking low, he twisted his body around and to the side, grabbing Aldis’ arm and heaving him without much effort over his shoulder, following the move up with a knee to the man’s chest and a hand lightly grasping his throat.

Hodge was panting underneath him, and slapped his arm in acknowledgement of defeat without hesitation.

“Is it bad that I found that kind of fucking hot?”

Jensen started at the sound of Jared’s teasing voice. He was so caught up in the sparring that he hadn’t noticed his Alpha standing a couple feet away, and he rose to greet him.

“Morning Jay,” he mumbled breathlessly, leaning in to press a quick kiss to his lover’s lips. Instead of letting him go, Jared wound an arm around him and pulled him into the curve of his body. “I’m sweaty,” Jensen pointed out, wrinkling his nose.

“Sweaty and sexy,” Jared smirked salaciously, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “That was incredible, Jen.”

“For you, maybe,” Aldis mock groaned. “My ass disagrees. To think I was the one who taught you how to fight hand-to-hand, JR.”

Jensen felt his Alpha tense at the name, and he nestled a little closer in wordless reassurance. He knew that it was just a nickname to Hodge. “You’re getting rusty, old man,” he quipped, relaxing when the banter reassured his boyfriend.

“This ‘old man’ got up at 5am to spar with your ungrateful ass,” his friend retorted. “Have some respect!”

“Wait, 5am? We only got home at 4:10.” Jared leveled him with a concerned look. “Are you telling me you had an hour’s rest, and you haven’t slept at all since then?”

“I was kicking Hodge’s ass,” Jensen defended weakly, sighing when both Jared and Aldis fixed him with identical masks of sternness. “I needed to clear my head,” he admitted in a low voice. “And I did. I’ll sleep for a little bit before we go to the club.”

Maybe sensing that they needed a private moment, Hodge slapped his back. “I got dibs on the shower, while y’all sort out which one of you is making me breakfast.”
“I bruised your ego, Hodge, not your hands. Get your own damn breakfast,” Jensen countered automatically, even knowing that he was going to make an awesome thank-you-breakfast for his friend.

Aldis snickered knowingly. “Sure, man,” he threw over his shoulder as he walked away.

Before Hodge was fully out of sight, Jared pulled him back into the circle of his arms, back resting against the Alpha’s warm, firm chest. Jensen allowed his head to fall back on to Jared’s shoulder, and his lover took full advantage of the position to kiss and suckle at his exposed neck.

“Are you okay?” he asked in between kisses. Jensen nodded as much as he could, with Jared’s mouth stuck insistently on his throat.

“Better than last night,” he allowed, bringing his hand up to play with Jared’s hair. “Thank you,” he whispered. Hesitation gripped him as he tried to find the words to encompass what he was feeling. He finally settled with, “You didn’t let go.”

“Never planned on it, baby,” the Alpha rumbled, making Jensen’s breath hitch when a territorial nip stung his skin.

He turned in his Alpha’s hold, bringing his arms up to wind around Jared’s neck and humming when his mate’s lips found his own.

They kissed gently for a few minutes, light, teasing touches designed to give Jensen a better footing and make him feel like he was on solid ground again. When Jared eventually pulled away, it left him feeling content and calm, like he could face his fears once more.

“So this is how you clear your head?” Jared asked with a playful grin. While his smile said one thing, Jensen knew enough of his Alpha to see the prompt that was lingering in hazel green eyes.

“Sometimes,” he admitted sheepishly, ducking his head. “Usually I take a run, but at times, going a few rounds is all that takes the edge off.” He raised his eyes to his Alpha’s, biting his lip unconsciously as he searched for a verbal justification. “It’s like I have all this energy inside me,” he explained eventually, “and it’s just fueling my thoughts going a thousand miles a minute. When I spar, all the energy seeps away, and I suddenly have all this space to organize the chaos in my head into something recognizable.”

Jared nodded slowly, to show he understood. “What about now?” he asked, his brow furrowed. “Do you know now, what’s going on in that scary and possibly dangerous little head of yours?”

“You say the sweetest things, Jay,” he deadpanned, fighting back his smile when Jared snickered to himself. “Actually, I do,” he revealed, his face and tone growing serious. “But we have something that we need to talk about first. I just…I don’t know how I’m gonna say this, Jay. I dunno how I’m even going to bring it up.”

~*Jared*~

The Alpha felt his blood run cold, despite the sun baking down on them. The raw quality of Jensen’s voice, and those wide green eyes, made him want to wrap his mate up and promise him that he was going to fix whatever it was that had him so scared.
“Tell me, baby,” he urged, his own voice turning rough. “Whatever it is, we can fix it together.”

Jensen cupped his jaw, fixing those emerald orbs on his. “Jared, it’s your father,” he said in a perfectly level voice. “I think he was possessed last night, when he was saying all those things to me.”

A moment too late, Jared noticed the grin that was threatening to break out on his lover’s face, and the mischievous sparkle in his eye that had been absent for far too long. Jensen threw his head back with a loud laugh as Jared let out a sigh of relief that ended in a disbelieving chuckle.

“You are such a jerk,” he mumbled, even as he laughed shakily. Jensen only laughed harder, and even though it was at his expense, Jared couldn’t help but feel fiercely grateful for the sound that always reassured him that his world was okay.

He growled playfully, surging forward in a sudden movement to tackle his beautiful, playful Beta. To his astonishment – even though he’d witnessed it just moments ago – Jensen side-stepped swiftly and easily, leaving him grasping at air. Before he could remotely comprehend what was happening, Jared was on his back on the ground, and his mate was straddling his chest with a smug little grin pulling at his full lips.

“This might’ve been fun, if it wasn’t so hot to submit to your Alpha side,” Jensen commented conversationally as he leaned down to kiss the tip of Jared’s nose.

Laughing at the loving gesture that was so contradictory to the badass maneuver that just knocked him on his ass, Jared slid his hands up along the outside of his mate’s thighs, fingers eventually coming to rest framing the curve of Jensen’s ass. He made no move to dislodge his pretty mate, enjoying the solid, reassuring weight of his mate on top of him, and the smiles that were so preferable to Jensen’s pain at Beaver’s house just hours earlier.

As though he could sense the turn Jared’s thoughts had taken, Jensen idly fingered the buttons on his shirt. “Jody used to tell me that, no matter how awful a situation was or seemed to be, that I should just find something to laugh about.” The Alpha stayed quiet, rubbing soothing circles with his thumbs as he listened to his mate reminisce about the mother he had loved so fiercely. So rare were these little stories, that Jared found himself smiling, warming as Jensen opened him up to another little facet of his childhood. “She used to say that nothing ever seemed as scary when you laughed. And that sometimes, in the face of your biggest fears, you needed to find some humor to remind yourself that there’s nothing that can’t be dealt with.”

“She was a smart woman,” Jared whispered, tugging Jensen down until he was sprawled across Jared’s torso. He wrapped his arms around his mate, holding him tight for a moment before rolling them over and shielding his Beta from the sun with his body.

“Mm,” Jensen hummed, closing his eyes for the briefest instant before opening them again to look at him. “Jay, your father…”

“Knows what he’s talking about,” Jared interrupted, steamrolling over what his lover was going to say. “I know that you think I’m biased, but won’t you take the word of the Pack Alpha?”

Vulnerability shone through Jensen’s impossibly green eyes, and with a burst of clarity, Jared knew that there was something other than the validation of the Pack Alpha that was needed to soothe the frayed nerves his mate was sporting.

“Tell me what you need, baby,” he implored softly.
Jensen brought his face closer, leaning their foreheads together. “I need the God’s honest truth from you, that I’ve not let you down,” he spoke steadily, but ardently.

Jared couldn’t help the half-incredulous laugh that bubbled up in his chest. “You couldn’t ever let me down, love, not even if you tried,” he answered honestly. “And in case you recall, I was the one who pulled you out of that little…interrogation. You would have gotten the answers from her if you stayed a little longer…but that wasn’t nearly as important as your wellbeing.” He butted his mate’s temple with his nose, leaning closer to nuzzle into the hollow beneath Jensen’s ear.

“Okay,” Jensen let out a small, shaky sigh, nodding his acceptance. “Okay. As long as…I never want to let you down Jay,” came the soft mumble, his mate rueful in his insecurity. “I can find a way to make it up to the pack. I can find a way to get the answers I need to keep them safe. But I can’t stand the thought of disappointing you, of not being everything you need and deserve.”

Jared leaned in impossibly closer, smiling tenderly when Jensen’s hand automatically found its way to rest against his heart. “That’s something you never have to be afraid of,” he husked truthfully. “One day, I hope you see yourself the way I see you.”

Jensen smirked. “Lustfully?” he asked innocently.

“That,” Jared allowed with a chuckle, not wanting to take away from the sincerity in his words, “and in complete, and helpless awe.”

“This is why you get laid so damn often.” But Jensen’s smile was almost bashful, and Jared saw the feelings his words provoked, hidden behind the well-timed jibe.

He leered playfully. “And also because I’m a fucking God in bed.”

Jensen dissolved into helpless laughter. It was the most beautiful sound Jared had heard in a long time.

~*Jensen*~

“Tell me what you figured out by taking Dodge down.”

Jensen’s eyes flicked to his Alpha’s as he rooted around for a frying pan to get breakfast going. Jared was perched on the counter, his position and his curious eyes making him look like a toddler despite his large size.

“Well,” he fiddled with the stove, turning it on as he ordered his thoughts in his head, “I thought back to the conversation I had with her. She told me that I was a lot like her, because of what we would do for family and love.”

“You’re nothing like that bitch,” Jared growled, his eyes flashing protectively. Grabbing the eggs from the fridge, Jensen shot him a soothing smile.

“That was my reaction too,” he commented. “But when I think about it…Jay, if it was you, or Chris, or Chad or Josh, or anyone in my family? There’s not a thing I wouldn’t do for y’all. Not a single, God damned thing.” He paused, sending Jared a meaningful look. “If it came down to it, I wouldn’t hesitate to kill for y’all.”
He watched silently as the words registered in the Alpha’s mind. He knew Jared got it when his eyes widened, a shocked look coming over his face.

“You think she tried to kill you on behalf of someone else? Someone she considers family?”

“Is it that far a shot?” he asked rhetorically, turning to crack the eggs into the pan. “I mean, she had this look in her eye when she was talking about it…what if she tried to kill me because someone else wanted me dead? We already know that she didn’t attack me for years before that day in the woods. I thought it was her vendetta, but it isn’t.”

Jared huffed slightly in frustration. “Between you and me, we have a depressing amount of enemies. How are we gonna narrow it down?”

Now, for the harder sell. Jensen took in a deep breath, turning his body slightly to face his lover. “I’m going to speak to Katherine.”

Jared looked at him with careful skepticism. “She’s dead,” he pointed out flatly.

“Exactly.” Jensen ran a hand through his already messy hair. “I think it’s time I see how powerful my bloodline is.” Comprehension dawned quickly in his Alpha’s hazel orbs, but he said the words out loud anyway.

“I want to start honing my Shamanic abilities, and see if I can make contact with anyone who might have some intel for us.”

###

Chapter End Notes

Hope y’all enjoyed! Much love! <3
Jared let out a raggedy breath at his mate’s proclamation. Truthfully, he was equal parts scared and excited at the prospect of his mate’s abilities; he had wholeheartedly supported Jensen’s intrigue about his ancestry, but the sheer amount of things they didn’t know about his bloodline? They were all things that had the potential to hurt Jensen just as much as they could give him closure.

Jared tapped his fingers restlessly against the kitchen counter, where he sat. As concerned as he was, he could sense his lover’s nervousness, as Jensen stood waiting for an answer. Quickly, so as not to give him the wrong idea, Jared wrapped his fingers around his mate’s wrist, pulling him into the space between his legs. Jensen relented easily, hands coming up to brace against his chest.

“I wouldn’t take any unnecessary risks,” his mate blurted before he could react. Jensen’s eyes were wide, but the set of his jaw told Jared that Jen’s obstinate streak was running strong. “I mean, sure, we don’t know much about any of this, but isn’t that an even better reason to explore it as an option? It could open up whole avenues in terms of…”

“Jen, whoa.” Jared smiled affectionately as Jensen instantly snapped his mouth closed with a huff, his lips forming a childish pout. “I’m not saying no.”

“Like it would stop me if you were,” Jensen shot back sharply, softly thumping an open palm against Jared’s chest. Jared’s grin widened, knowing full well that despite Jensen’s words, his mate would take his feelings into account. He liked to pretend otherwise, but Jensen had the same soft spot for him that he had for Jensen; one that surpassed all their normal attitudes and actions. “In case you forgot, I’m a fully grown man who can make my own decisions.”

Really, there were several ways he could take that comment. He could take it as an opportunity for a leer and a dirty innuendo, he could rile Jensen up about it…or he could soothe his pretty mate and assure him that he was well aware of Jensen’s strength and independence. His fiery spirit that made him wild and untamed. Promise him that Jared would never dream of controlling that part of his spunky and spirited mate because he loved how Jensen could find it in himself to take on the rest of
the world, when he had something to fight for.

Three options. So naturally…

“Believe me, baby, I love every fully grown part of you, especially the ones that I get to feel up every night.”

Jared doubled over, wheezing as Jensen connected his fist with Jared’s gut. Still, he thought ruefully to himself, definitely so worth it.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” he rasped when he recovered, reaching out to curl his hands around his mate’s hips. “But seriously, I’m not freaking out.” He thought about his words for a second before amending, “Well, not a lot, at least.”

Jensen sighed and dropped his head to rest against Jared’s shoulder. “What are you worrying about?” he asked in a mumble, his eyelashes tickling the Alpha’s skin as Jensen fluttered his eyes closed.

Once again, Jared took a minute to formulate his reply, reaching over absently to save the eggs from burning. It was a true indicator of how distracted and fatigued Jensen was, that he hadn’t noticed the food about to scorch, nor did he open his eyes when Jared dragged the frying pan and discarded it on one of the cool stove plates. In fact, Jensen barely reacted to his motion at all, but for reaching his arms around Jared’s waist and pillowing his head more comfortably against the Alpha’s broad chest. Resuming his original position, Jared wound his arms around his mate so that they were cocooned close together, breathing in deeply and taking comfort from the smell he associated uniquely with Jensen.

“I’m worrying about all the unknown variables here,” he answered finally. “And I’m worried about all the ways you could get hurt because of it.”

The hot, moist breath from Jensen’s answering sigh warmed Jared’s t-shirt clad skin. “Everything we do as of late has some element of danger associated with it,” his mate countered tiredly. Hearing the weariness in his lover’s voice gave Jared the barest flash of an idea, that he reigned in to think about at a later date when Jensen resumed his argument. “Right now, we gotta think about which risks have the potential to yield the most rewards.”

“Jen, you sound like a businessman trying to sell me shares in a shady market,” Jared teased gently, and was rewarded with a surprised little chuckle from his boyfriend.

Jensen angled his head up to look at him, without removing his cheek from Jared’s chest. “You callin’ my history shady?” he asked in a mock tough voice, his green eyes twinkling mischievously. “I’ll have you know, us Shamans are no shadier than you wolves.”

Jared chuckled. “Way to embrace your heritage, baby,” he shook his head with a fond smirk. “But how are you going to embrace something you have no knowledge of? You can’t just try to get information from people who post fanciful ideas on the internet. And it’s not like we know any Shamans that we can just call up and randomly ask to give us a 90-minute tutorial on the basics of having magic in your blood.” Jensen pulled back, but only far enough for him to look Jared in the eye.

“We know that my…gift,” Jensen seemed to stumble over the word, despite his earlier defenses of his ancestry, “was passed down from my father. I thought I could just visit Hank and ask him to give me some details about them. Maybe he knows someone who was related to my dad.”

His brow knitting with skepticism, Jared asked as gently as he could, “And what happens if your
uncle knows nothing about anything, which is a more than likely chance?"

“I’m not gonna run off, guns blazing, looking for answers in dodgy places, if that’s what you’re asking,” Jensen replied in a frank and reasonable voice. “If Hank doesn’t know anything, then we start from scratch. Except, I’ll also have had a visit with one of the few people I still have, that I can call family.” Jensen smiled at him, looking a little uncertain. “As much as this is for answers, I’d also like to see him. Remind myself that not everything from my past turned so horribly wrong.”

A pang of sympathy squeezed the Alpha’s heart as he reached out to caress his Beta’s cheek. Jensen let out a little sigh of contentment, leaning into the touch, and something that sounded suspiciously like a purr rumbled through Jared’s chest at the feeling.

“I understand, and I’m glad that you’re not gonna go at this with the same ferocity as you went with JR,” Jared nodded his approval. His gut suddenly twisted with the fear of rejection as he asked his next question. “Can I come with you?”

Something akin to hurt flashed through emerald orbs. “Don’t you trust me?”

Jared’s face burned. “Not about trust at all, baby,” he looked down, fixing his eyes on a spot of the counter near his knee. “I just…I didn’t realize how much your uncle meant to you, and now that I know…I want to meet him. As your boyfriend.”

Jensen laughed, sounding relieved, and Jared didn’t resist when his mate’s hand came to tilt his face back up. He looked sheepishly into warm, sparkling eyes, and a smile so bright it took his breath from his chest.

“It never occurred to me that you’d want that,” the artist admitted softly, love shining through in his voice and his expression. “But I love you for the fact that you do. And I’d love for you to meet him officially.”

Jensen gave him a chaste kiss before returning to the stove and efficiently starting to cook again, looking far more relaxed and focused.

“You know,” Jared murmured, entranced by the sure and confident movements of his lover. “JR might have been the hardass in you, but Jensen is still the one with all the plans.”

The heart-stopping smile that Jensen aimed at him in response, made that odd purring sound tumble through him again.

“Ugh, you two and your cutesiness makes me just wanna stab myself in the eye.” Aldis entered the kitchen, aiming a look of mock distaste at them.

Jensen promptly flipped his friend and mentor off, launching into an argument with the man, but all Jared could think was,

Still. Definitely, so worth it.

~*Jensen*~

“Jensen, you are the only senior on the school premises today. What part of Ditch Day eluded you?”
Jensen straightened from where he was hunched over his lab counter, wincing as the motion caused his aching muscles to throb in protest and his back to crack as his vertebrae realigned itself. He turned to face Beaver, a small yawn escaping his lips.

"The actual ditching part," he answered, his voice raspy from lack of use. He rolled his shoulders and his neck, trying to work out the kinks. "And you’d think, as a teacher, that you’d be happy to see me working so diligently." He suppressed a yawn, clenching his jaw around it.

Beaver didn’t rise to the bait, his eyes remaining uncharacteristically soft and concerned as he took the seat opposite Jensen. "I would be happy if I thought you got more than an hour or two of sleep last night," he replied pointedly.

The green-eyed artist scowled, but let the yawn run its course. "Jared called you."

"No," Beaver refuted. "Son, one look at those bruises under your eyes, and you were pretty much made. You look like hell."

"Careful, Sir," he snarked without thinking, "I wouldn’t want anyone to think you were coming on to me."

Beaver chuckled lightly, the sound surprising him. Their Chemistry professor rarely smiled, let alone laughed.

“So you’re still a little smartass,” the older man shot back, “but that doesn’t explain what you’re doing here.”

Jensen gestured vaguely at the countertop behind him. "Just testing out some theories," he adopted an aloof tone, not so much intentionally cagey as he was used to keeping his hunches close to his chest.

“One day,” the Healer grouched, “I don’t know when, but one day, you’re gonna explain this little experiment you got going on. Until then…how are you holding up after last night?"

Jensen sucked in air through his teeth, curling his hand around the nape of his neck. "I’m dealing," he answered eventually. He found it easy to tell the older man the truth, despite the fact that they’d never really had a heart-to-heart before. Something about Beaver gave him the sense of safety, like the man was a surrogate father underneath his gruff exterior. He had relied on the man’s wisdom more than once, and he found it was equally easy to rely on him to guide and advise him. "Jared and I are going to visit my uncle in about an hour," he revealed. "See if he can tell me anything about my Shaman heritage."

Beaver’s eyebrows knitted. “That seems like a… bold idea.”

“I’ve been told that Fortune might be partial to favoring it,” Jensen responded dryly. “It’s the best lead we’ve got, Sir. And I’m not giving up on getting those answers.”

“If you’re trying to prove something to the pack…”

“Due respect, it’s gone far beyond that now, Sir,” Jensen cut his teacher off, feeling uncomfortable with talking back but needing to reinforce his own reasons for doing this. “This is about the safety of the Pack. It’s about knowing what happened, in order to make sense of what might come to pass.”

“If you’re trying to talk him out of it, I’ve already tried.” Jared walked into the lab, his voice all-suffering even as his lips curved upwards. “Waste of time and breath. It’s like banging your head against a brick wall.” His Alpha greeted him with a kiss to the temple before leaning casually against
his workspace, facing Mr. Beaver. “But I gotta thank you for trying, Sir.”

“I would have listened, if y’all had offered me any good arguments or reasons,” Jensen defended archly as he packed away his things. “Isn’t my fault y’all had none.”

He tuned out as Jared launched into a good-natured tirade about how Jensen used his “pretty eyes that forced people to concede arguments”. His boyfriend was well into his rant, to the audience of a single, possibly bored professor, when the shrill sound of Jensen’s phone cut through the air.

His stomach flipped uneasily when he saw Chris’ number on the screen. “Yo, Chris,” he answered, shouldering his bag and walking quickly out of the lab with a distracted wave at Mr. Beaver.

“What’s up? I’m on my way to you now to drop off the keys to the club.” He scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the floor of the hallway, watching as Jared said his goodbyes to the Healer.

“Jensen.”

His blood ran cold as Chris’ voice, low and cracked and trembling, came through the speaker. “Chris?”

“I don’t think I can…the club…” his pseudo brother’s voice shook, sounding dazed and lost. “I think…Jensen?”

The confusion he heard broke Jen’s heart, made a cold sweat break out over his neck. What could possibly have ruffled his normally unflappable friend? Was he sick? Had something happened? To Sophia? To Chris himself? Was he being threatened by someone as they spoke?

That thought made bile splash in the back of his throat. Gesturing frantically at Jared, he began to sprint to the car once his Alpha caught his wild motions. “Chris, is someone there?” he asked urgently as he ran. “Is something wrong? Is something happening right now?”

“I don’t…no, no one…well, Sophia…I…”

He reached the car a full few seconds before Jared did, and he threw his stuff in the backseat. “Chris, talk to me, buddy,” he begged as Jared finally caught up, throwing himself into the driver’s seat and staring at Jensen with wide eyes. “Come on, Chris, you gotta tell me what’s wrong, man.” He fought against the tightening of his throat, the fear that gripped him vice tight. “Me and Jared are on our way, but you gotta tell what the danger is.”

His Alpha screeched out of the parking lot, having thrown the car into gear the moment Chris’ name was out of Jensen’s mouth. His hand found the edge of Jared’s shirt and he held on tightly, in the hopes of it grounding his fear.

“No danger,” Chris finally reported, in a strained tone. “I just…how are we gonna do this, Jen?”

Biting back the urge to inundate his friend with questions, Jensen took a deep breath. “The same way we always do it, man,” he answered instead, trying to ride out whatever panic Chris was in with him. “We’ll handle it, whatever it is.”

He took very deliberately loud, even breaths, relaxing minutely when Chris began to unconsciously mimic him. Jared stroked a comforting thumb along his jaw as they waited out the red light, and Jensen leaned into the touch gratefully, kissing the pad of Jared’s thumb when it reached his lips. Jared brushed back a strand of his hair before shifting gears and stepping on it once more, as soon as the light switched, leaving Jensen to keep the breathing up with Kane.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen.”
Jensen thought he'd feel the tiniest bit reassured the moment Chris could utter a full sentence without choking, but the small, afraid tone – reminiscent of a little child – only made the urge to hug his brother that much stronger.

“I know you didn’t, Brother,” he murmured gently, reassuringly. “As long as there’s no danger, everything else is okay.” Exponentially calmer himself now, Jensen forced himself to unhook his fingers from Jared’s shirt, smoothing it over with an apologetic look at his boyfriend. “Chris, are you alone at your place?”

“Sophia is coming in about a half hour,” the long-haired alpha informed him, still subdued. “I didn’t want to call and pressure her.”

That struck Jensen as odd, since he knew how close Chris and Sophia had become in the last few months since they’d gotten together. “Wouldn’t she want to know what’s going on, buddy?” he asked quietly.

“She knows,” was all that Kane offered.

Jensen kept his friend on the phone, offering calming words as soon as Chris started to get a little agitated again. To him, the normally short drive seemed to take eons; when they finally pulled up into the familiar driveway, it couldn’t have happened fast enough.

Jared was on his heels as he got to the porch, and before he could knock, Chris was there, wrenching the door open. His eyes were wide and his hair looked like he’d run his hand through it several hundred times too many.

Before he could ask anything, Chris blurted it out.

“*Pregnant. Jen, Sophia’s pregnant.*”

Jensen gaped at his best friend, the revelation knocking him like a home run. He battled to comprehend the words, to understand the implications of them.

She was…pregnant?

The touch of Jared’s hand against the small of his back reminded Jensen that he had to breathe. He let out a shuddering gust of air, bracing his hand against the door frame.

“You’re gonna be a father,” he mumbled numbly, trying to imagine Chris cooing over a baby bundle.

At his words, his friend’s face whitened dramatically, as though that connection hadn’t yet linked up in his mind. He swayed dangerously on his feet, and that more than anything shook Jensen from his own stupor.

Lurching forward, he grabbed Chris’ arm, reaching an arm around his middle to prop him up. “Help,” he uttered in a low voice, and instantly, Jared was on the other side of Chris, taking the majority of his weight.

He tapped his brother’s cheek. “Hey, snap out of it, Chris,” he urged, gentle but firm. “You’re okay. Everything is going to be okay. We can figure this out.”

Continuing his slew of reassurances, he worked with Jared to settle Chris on to his couch. Making a split second decision, he fished the keys to the club from his pocket.
“Jay,” he addressed his boyfriend in a hushed voice, not wanting to upset his friend, “he needs to be with Sophia today. Could you ask Chad to open up the club for me? Tell him I’ll make him a whole pan of brownies if he does.”

Jared pouted for a second, side tracked. “I want brownies too.”

An almost hysterical laugh bubbled through him and he forced it down, biting his lip against his smile as well. “So, so not the issue right now, babe.”

Jared had the grace to grin sheepishly. “Right. Sorry. I’ll go coerce Chad, and I’ll come get you in 30. We’ll leave to your uncle’s place from here.”

“I love you,” was all Jensen answered with. The only way he could think of that would convey his gratitude and his approval all at once.

“More than the moon and the stars, baby,” Jared winked, pressing a quick kiss to his lips before leaving.

His response was instantaneous and knee-jerk. “Forever and always.”

Trusting his mate to see himself out, Jensen sat heavily next to his friend, who was hunched in on himself and focusing on his breathing. Reaching out, he gripped the base of Kane’s neck, massaging the tension out of his friend.

He waited out the silence patiently, having regained his own composure, and allowing Chris to do the same. He was ready to wait all day if he had to, even if it meant postponing the visit to Hank.

Chris had been there unfalteringly for him, through thick and thin, and bad and worse. Being there for him through this was nothing, not really, not when there was virtually nothing he wouldn’t do for Chris.

Finally, something resembling a level tone came from Kane’s lips. “We haven’t even graduated high school yet.”

Jensen sensed that his friend needed to work through this alone, so he resisted the urge to comfort. “No, y’all haven’t.”

“Babies, even pups, they’re hard work. We’d need to take care of it.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty high maintenance.”

“I’d probably need to get a job, to support her.”

“Probably.”

“Sophia’s parents…they might kick her out.”

“Maybe.”

Chris looked at him, not seeming to have even noticed Jensen’s lack of speaking. A new look was in his eyes, now that he’d laid out all his fears. A little spark of defiance; that edge that the alpha always had.

“But it’d be my kid, Jen.”

“Yours, and Sophia’s.”
“It’d be the best parts of the both of us.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“My boy, or maybe my little girl, or maybe both.”

“There’s lots of permutations.”

Finally, Chris’ attention focused on him. The confusion and fear in his eyes were still present, but now it was mixed with a strange sort of fervor.

Chris shifted to face him. “I’m gonna take care of her, Jen,” he stated surely. “I’m gonna take care of her, and the pup. Or pups. What the fuck ever.”

Jensen relaxed his muscles, sighing in relief as he realized that his friend was coherent enough to talk without tripping over his uncertainties. “I know,” he nodded simply. “I never doubted that, not for a single second, not once.”

Chris nodded slowly, taking a deep breath and sitting back, running a calmer hand through his mane of hair.

“We need to tell her parents first,” the alpha mumbled, looking drained. “And money might be an issue, we’d need to talk about that.”

This part – this problem solving, strategy forming part – this was what Jensen was good at.

“No matter what happens with her parents, you’ll both have a place in the Padalecki pack,” he vowed with certainty. “I’ll talk to Jared and his parents, I’ll bring them up to speed. And I’ve got some money saved up from some art commissions before I came here. I want you to take it, use it so that y’all can graduate instead of looking around for a job now.”

Chris was already shaking his head. “I’m not taking your money, Freckles,” he refused adamantly. “You were saving that for college.”

“I can get a loan, or try for a scholarship,” he countered. “And it’s just money. What’s more important, is you and Sophia. If using that money means you both graduate, and the baby gets the care it needs? Then you’re taking the damn money, Kane.”

“Jensen,” the alpha’s tone was aggrieved, “I can’t just…”

“Look,” the artist interrupted, holding up a palm, “you can pay me back if it means that much to you. I don’t care, this way or the next, but you’re graduating high school even if I have to cuff you to your desk.”

Chris seemed ready to mouth off with a snarky response, but thought better of it at the last second. “Thank you, Jen.”

Doing a double-take at the serious tone, Jensen raised an eyebrow at his brother. “For the money?”

“No. Well, yeah, the money, but not just that.” Kane raised solemn blue eyes to his, heavy gratitude and love shining there. “For not hesitating to help me, help us. For being on our side in the pack. For coming here so quickly even when you had other plans, because I was having a freak-out. For everything, man, you’re always there. You believe in me more than I ever could myself.”

“Don’t even, Chris,” Jensen rested his elbows against his knees, not breaking eye contact. “You’re
my best friend. My brother. There’s not a damn thing you need to be thanking me for.” He stopped for a moment, reconsidering, before giving his friend a mischievous grin. “Well, except for maybe entertaining this massive chick flick moment. Dude, between you and Sophia, and me and Jay, we are seriously close to losing our man cards.”

Chris snorted, and the sound soothed out some of the tension in Jensen’s shoulders, even through the hint of hysteria that accompanied it. “Please, Ackles,” he scoffed. “You and Lover Boy are more touchy feely than anyone, least of all me and Soph, and you two are both guys. Y’all lose man cards every damn time y’all look at each other with cartoon hearts in your eyes.”

Jensen mock scowled. “I hate you, Kane. Remind me why I’m here again?”

“Because I’m your best friend. Your brother,” Chris parroted back with a small grin that couldn’t totally hide the affection that stemmed from the assurance.

He huffed a laugh, grasping Chris’ shoulder for a moment. “Touché.”

A comfortable silence fell over the two friends, Chris lost in thought and Jensen waiting patiently for the other boy to share. Before long, Kane aimed a tiny smile at him.


The look on his brother’s face was a volatile mix of fear and apprehension, and joy and awe, and unfathomable uncertainty. Jensen took a moment to consider his answer, before replying.

“Yeah, maybe it should have happened a little later in life,” he allowed, the slightest hint of admonishment in his tone, “but that doesn’t mean it has to be a bad thing.” He lifted one shoulder, dropping it down in a shrug. “A baby is a big change…but you’re stepping up, and looking forward, which is all you need to do right now. How does Soph feel about all of it?”

“I don’t know,” Chris shrugged, scrubbing his face tiredly with his palm. “She hasn’t actually told me yet.”

Jensen frowned, alarm bells going off in his head. “Wait a second, if she didn’t tell you…then how do you know she’s pregnant?”

“I saw the card for the OBGyn,” he admitted, having the grace to look a little sheepish. “I called them and they told me that Soph has an appointment for this Friday.”

As though summoned by them talking about her, the front door opened. “Chris!” Sophia’s strained voice preceded the brunette’s appearance in the living room. She looked tired, completely drained, but she summoned a smile when she saw Jensen there. “Hey, Jen-Ster,” she greeted him, giving him a hug before walking into Chris’ opened arms. “Hey, you.”

“Aw, baby,” Chris pulled her in tight, and Jensen felt suddenly awkward, knowing he shouldn’t be intruding on their moment. “It’s okay, it’s all gonna be okay, we’ll figure this out. A baby…it’s a big leap, but I’m gonna be there with you every step of the way, Gorgeous. I promise.”

“Really?” Sophia’s voice lifted, hope shining through it as tears built up in her eyes. “Oh, Chris…honey, thank you. I love you so much.” Jensen turned quietly, planning on slipping out while the couple was talking, but he was stopped by Sophia’s voice. “Jen-Ster, wait, I was actually hoping I could talk to you about this.”

Confusion settled deep in the green-eyed artist, but he nodded anyway, shooting the petite woman a reassuring smile. “Of course, Soph. What do you need?”
“Just some advice, for now,” she smiled wearily. “My parents…they didn’t really take the news well, per se…”

“Oh, Soph,” his voice softened with sympathy as he reached out to take her hand. “Whatever you need, you got it. I’ve already told Chris, I’ve got some money saved up that I want y’all to take. And you know you always have a home with us.”

“That means so much to me,” Sophia told him tremulously, squeezing his hand. “But it’s…it’s my sister I have to worry about now. She’s priority to me, you know?”

Jensen felt like he was missing something, and his confusion must have been reflected on Chris’ face, because Sophia suddenly looked between them.

“It’s just…” her voice sounded uncertain now. “It’s difficult to raise a baby alone, you know, and she…”

“Alone?” Chris’ voice cut through his girlfriend’s. “Since when are you alone in this?”

Sophia took a step out of Chris’ arms, sporting a baffled look similar to their own. “I’m not alone, Tessa is.”

“What does Tessa have to do with the baby?”

“Christian,” Sophia articulated, as though she were talking to a toddler. “Tessa is having the baby. I think that pretty much makes her everything to do with it.”

And like a freight train hitting him, Jensen connected the dots, fighting tooth and nail against the guffaw that was building up in his chest. He bit his lip until he tasted blood, watching as it dawned on his friend’s face.

A few seconds later, it did, and Kane’s eyes widened, looking like he’d been slapped silly. “Tessa is having the baby,” he whispered, stupidly voicing his realization.

“Duh.” Sophia looked exasperated. “What did you think?” There was a single beat before she put her hands on her hips. “Wait, and how did you even know Tessa was pregnant? She only told me a couple days ago, and our folks today.”

Chris was still blinking dumbly, and Jensen quickly interjected, trying to give him friend a moment to compose himself. “Listen, Soph,” he addressed the brunette, digging his nails into his palms and praying he wasn’t about to lose the fleeting grip on his amusement. “I can try to talk to the Padaleckis, see if they’ll take you and Tessa in. Until then, my offer still stands for both of y’all.”

“That’s amazing, Jen-Ster, thank you so much,” Sophia grabbed him in a tight hug. “I can’t tell you what it…HOLY MOTHER LUNA!” She suddenly shrieked, turning to face a still-unmoving Chris. “You thought I was pregnant?!!”

That proved to be too much for Jensen to handle, and he burst into laughter, doubled over with the force of it as the scene continued to unfold in front of him.

“What was I supposed to think?” Chris was defending himself weakly. “It wasn’t the logical thought process, that your 16 year old sister was pregnant and that you had the contact card for her OBGyn! How would I have thought of that?”

Jensen heard the familiar roar of the Impala’s engine, and wondered whether he should try to bid his friends goodbye.
“CHRISTIAN KANE, ARE YOU SAYING THAT YOU THINK I LOOK FAT?!”

Then again, goodbyes were overrated.

God, his Alpha had fucking fantastic timing.

~*Jared*~

When Jensen wrenched open the Impala door while the car was still in motion, and tumbled into the front seat gasping for breaths through riotous laughter, Jared honestly wasn’t sure whether to be shocked, worried, amused, or all three.

“Drive, Jay!” Jensen managed to get out, through breathless laughter that warmed Jared’s heart, even unaware as he was on the source of it. “Let’s get outta here.”

It was easy enough to oblige, but his mate was still doubled over with mirth, tears streaming from his eyes, and Jared wanted to know what had brought that beautiful sound back. Especially since, when he’d left, Jen had been dealing with Chris’ crisis.

“Baby…”

“So-Sophia’s not pregnant,” Jen choked out between chuckles, clutching at his stomach. “Her sis---her sister is.”

Jared laughed loudly, his concern easing at the knowledge that Kane wasn’t going to have to deal with the fallout from Sophia’s parents.

“They spoke for five minutes,” Jensen continued, finally subdued to giggles, “before we realized that Sophia wasn’t pregnant, and now she thinks that Chris thinks she’s fat.”

“Oh, fuck,” Jared choked on a laugh, sympathy running through him. “Chris would have been better off if she had been pregnant.”

###

Jensen had fallen asleep not ten minutes after they left town, finally catching up on the sleep his anger and anxiety had deprived him of. Jared was too relieved that his mate was finally taking a break, to object to it, and so he contented himself listening to the music on low and sneaking quick glances to his beautiful, sleeping passenger.

The stretch of road was quiet, like the world was affording him that time to deliberate on the roller coaster of their lives. He thought about all the ill-fated goings-on, he thought about how Jensen never seemed to see what impact he had on the people around him, without really even trying, he thought about how fiercely his mate loved, despite the kind of life he had led…

He could never have imagined, all those months ago, that his mate was such an incredible and amazing person.

There were still mornings when he woke up, that he was half afraid he’d been dreaming this whole time, and it never failed to make him grateful every time he realized that Jen was real and a part of his life. Sometimes it crossed his mind to wonder what he must have done to deserve his beautiful mate,
but mostly he just enjoyed every moment spent together.

Making full use of his introspective time, Jared’s mind wandered, inevitably, to Jensen’s foster father.

His Alpha was still out for blood. Though content with his Beta’s close proximity, Jared knew that the shit was going to hit the fan in a big way the moment that Jensen went back to his house. His mind registered the fact that the abuse had stopped as of late, if Jensen’s word and his lack of bruises were anything to go by, but his heart staunchly decided that he’d had enough of allowing his mate to walk back into danger. Walk into situations where he could get hurt. He’d allowed it too many times, trying to respect Jensen’s decisions and his independence, but this wasn’t something that he could fold on.

He’d had enough of ignoring the problem.

He doubted he could ever come to peace with the abuse his mate had had to suffer for so long, from so many people, not to mention the fact that it came from one of the only people Jensen should have been able to trust implicitly. He wasn’t as strong as Jensen was…he couldn’t find compassion in his heart for a world that had been nothing but unkind to such an amazing person as his Jensen. The only thing he was coming up with, was anger. Sorrow. Bitter disappointment.

“You’re thinkin’ pretty loudly there, Jay.”

Jared started, smiling sheepishly when he looked over to find emerald eyes staring at him intently. “You should be resting, baby.”

“You should be telling me what’s going on in that head of yours,” Jensen countered, eyeing him speculatively. After a moment, he asked shrewdly, “This is about my father, isn’t it?”

The Alpha let out a frustrated sound, not even bothering to deny it. “He doesn’t deserve to be called your father, Jen,” he ground out, his hands on the wheel tightening marginally. “A father doesn’t hurt his son. He protects him and takes care of him, and makes him feel safe and loved.” He blew a breath through his teeth. “I just…I don’t get how you can forgive him. Forget everything he’s put you through.”

“Nah, Jay,” Jensen shook his head, voice turning gentle, “there’s a big difference between forgiving and forgetting. I’ve forgiven him, but that doesn’t mean that I will ever forget what he’s done.”

“How can you forgive him,” Jared asked, truly perplexed, “for stealing the better part of your childhood, corrupting your innocence and making you feel unsafe in your own home?”

He glanced over at his mate, worried for a moment that he may have been too blunt with his words, but he was reassured by the thoughtful look that dominated Jensen’s face as he gnawed on his bottom lip, eyes fixed on the passing scenery.

“I remember the dad he used to be, Jay,” his mate finally answered, tilting his head to look at him again. “The loving, understanding, supportive, encouraging, protective, reliable father that he was before the accident that took my foster mom away. Losing her…it changed him. For a long time, I thought that the best parts of him died with her, but if he’s willing to try to recover the man he used to be…well, then, I’m willing to forgive him, if it will help the process.” Jensen shrugged his shoulders self-consciously. “I’m doing it for my mom, because she loved him and believed in the best of everyone and she taught me the same. And I’m also doing it for the man who once stayed up all night naming stars with me because I was afraid to go to sleep, in case I dreamed of the accident that took my birth parents away.”
Unbidden, an image rose in Jared’s mind, of his mate as a child, encased in the strong arms that all fathers seemed to have, looking up at the stars and forgetting why he was afraid in the first place.

“He was your hero,” he observed quietly, as a part of him unwillingly opened up to the possibility that Eric Kripke wasn’t evil incarnate. Much as he didn’t want to allow any part of him to entertain justification, it was clear in Jensen’s voice, what the man meant to him.

It wasn’t a question, but nevertheless, his mate nodded. “He was always there to chase the shadows away,” he whispered. “He used to know what I was afraid of without needing to ask, and somehow, he always knew how to make me feel like everything was going to be okay. Until the day she died…until he realized that things might never be okay again. And he gave up. On everything.”

That stubbornly compassionate part of Jared – the part that he was sure Jensen had been cultivating since the day they met – forced him to consider how he would feel if he ever lost the love of his life. He would never have harmed a single hair on his kid’s perfect head, he was sure of that…but he wasn’t sure he would have been able to raise them, either. The thought of living a single day with Jensen…it was enough to send him into a tailspin of despair and pain. If Kripke had felt a fraction of that pain, and he wasn’t able to let his child be raised by someone more capable of doing it…Jared hated to admit it, but he could see why the man turned to alcohol. And some people just didn’t handle their liquor very well.

He blinked, coming back from his thoughts as Jensen laid a hand over his on the steering. It was only then that he noticed how tight he had been gripping the wheel; his knuckles turning white.

“It’s okay to understand, Jay,” his Beta murmured soothingly, his knack for pinpointing Jared’s distress ever accurate. “Sympathizing with him…it doesn’t mean you’re betraying me, or not protecting me, or defending my dad’s actions. It just means that your heart is big enough to realize that a deeply flawed person, isn’t necessarily a bad person.”

“Deeply flawed.” Jared couldn’t hold in his derisive, mirthless snort. “That’s pretty fucking kind, baby. And as for having a big heart…that’s just the part of me that wants to make you happy. The Alpha blood inside me? Still demands retribution.”

“I think that’s why I put off on telling you about it as long as I did,” his mate offered thoughtfully. “I wanted you to see the man I knew, instead of the man he had become. I didn’t want you to have to fight past anger and protectiveness…I guess some part of me still hoped that one day, we could all just put the past behind us.”

“Hey.” Jared grabbed his Beta’s hand, heart hurting at the pain that finally crept into his lover’s voice. “It’s gonna be okay, love. We can…we’ll figure something out. Together. Like always.”

Jensen brought their joined hands to his mouth, making Jared smile as soft lips danced across his knuckles. “Like always,” he agreed. Before he could say anything else, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Jensen fished the device from his pocket, eyes scanning quickly over the screen before he laughed. “It’s from Sophia,” he told the Alpha. “Chris is still alive,” he read out loud, “thanks in large part to his pretty face. Thanks for the support with my sister, Jen-Ster. I really appreciate it, and I know Tess will too. Whatever happens, I’m glad you’re part of our little family. Love, Soph.”

“There’s another two people under the Ackles Charm,” Jared teased fondly, deciding to put the heavy talk on the back burner for a little while.

Jensen laughed, an adorable little blush coloring his cheeks. “I’m not sure that it was charm, so much
as the desperation from a bad situation,” he refuted. “Her parents kicked her out, and they don’t
know where to turn or what to do.”

“Poor girl,” Jared frowned sympathetically, sobering. “We should talk to my mom and dad. Sophia is
basically part of our pack already; it shouldn’t be too big a step to accept her sister too. The kid’s
gonna need the support, and our pack respects the hell out of life bearers, so there’ll be minimum
judgement for her to deal with, and…what’s this for?” Jared beamed as his mate suddenly snuggled
close, peppering kisses over his throat and collar bone.

Jensen pressed one more, lingering kiss above Jared’s heart before leaning back. “For wanting to
help, and for being so in-tune with me that it makes me feel like you couldn’t possibly be real.”

And all at once, everything was calm in Jared’s heart. Because as long as Jensen felt that way about
him, he really believed that they could overcome anything. He would accept Tessa, he would let go
of his thirst for vengeance, and he would even try to forgive, or at least be civil towards Kripke…just
as long as Jensen kept that softness in his voice when he spoke about him. Just as long as Jensen kept
that look in his eyes; that sparkle when he looked at him that made Jared feel like he was ten feet tall.

That made him feel more loved than any being in existence.

His mate’s love was like a drug he would never tire of being addicted to.

“We’re the real deal, baby,” he murmured, catching Jensen’s hand once more and pressing a hot,
open-mouthed kiss on the inside of his wrist. “We’re the best team there is.”

Jensen grinned. “You’re gonna have to break that news to Luke.”

Jared chuckled, feeling like a phantom load was being lifted from his shoulders, even as he knew it
was merely that Jensen was sharing the burden.

“We really have to have a talk with that pup.”

~*Jensen*~

The rest of the drive was filled with lighter topics; debates over their favorite books, scale ratings of
songs they liked, a friendly war between their favorite TV shows; and Jensen barely felt the drive. It
seemed like no time at all before they were pulling up in Hank’s street, parking a few blocks away
once more, just to err on the side of caution.

He wasn’t sure whether he saw it first, or felt it first over their mating bond, but as they exited the
sanctuary of the Impala, Jensen realized that his Alpha was nervous.

It was endearing in a way he couldn’t have expected it to be, seeing that his boyfriend wanted to
make a good impression. He made his way around the car to the driver’s side, where Jared seemed to
be immobilized, leaning against the car.

He sat on the hood of the car, feet propped against the left wheel, patiently waiting him out.

“It’d be nice if at least one member of my mate’s family thinks I’m good for you,” Jared finally spoke
sheepishly, a self-deprecating little smile playing on his lips.
Jensen smirked. “Because an absent Josh, a psychotic Aunt Katherine and a previously dead-beat Eric were the best representatives of my family?”

Jared laughed, the sound lighting up his insides. “You make a fair point,” he nodded, still chuckling. “But your uncle... he’s the first person in your family that you’ve actually wanted me to meet. I don’t want to embarrass you, baby.”

Jensen hopped off his perch, going to press Jared into the car with his body, until they were pressed together chest to toe. His motions deliberate, he curled a fist in his Alpha’s silky locks, pulling his face down to meet his, and snaked his other hand underneath Jared’s shirt, fingers dancing over the contours of his boyfriend’s muscular back. He kissed him softly, reverently, barely a brush of lips and sharing of breath.

It didn’t take long for Jared to get with the program, and when he did, he flipped them around in a flash, grinding his body into Jensen’s for good measure. He took control of Jensen’s gentle kiss, turning it desperate and dirty. The dual sensation of the cool metal of the Impala through his thin t-shirt and Jared’s fevered body against his front, was enough to make him moan and clutch at the skin of Jared’s back. He knew he was leaving scratches, and he only hoped he wasn’t hurting his Alpha too much.

Jared bit his lip before licking over it soothingly, and then doing it all over again until Jensen was trembling. As one big hand curled possessively around the curve of his ass, Jensen had to wonder whether Jared’s kisses was one of the wonders of the world.

It fucking well should be, since the man kissed like someone who had just found salvation in the onslaught of despair.

When one hand came up to thumb his nipple, Jensen had to choke out a yellow light.

“Jay, fuck...” he moaned breathily, feeling wrecked. “We can’t, not here, not now.”

Jared nodded, but all he did was move his mouth to traverse Jensen’s neck, the hand on his chest now coming up to angle his face upwards, for maximum access to his throat. He suckled hard, pressing Jensen into the car even as the hand on his ass pulled him into Jared’s body.

Being pushed and pulled at the same time had never felt so fucking hot.

He squirmed uselessly, held fast in the Alpha’s ridiculously strong, corded arms. “Jay...” he groaned.

Finally, Jared took pity on him. Pressing his forehead into the nook between Jensen’s neck and shoulder, the Alpha stilled to catch his breath, arms coming to wrap around Jensen’s waist in far less dangerous territory. After a few minutes, Jared looked up, and his pupils were mostly back to normal.

Dipping his head once more so his mouth was on Jensen’s ear, the Alpha growled, “When we get home, I’m gonna fuck you into the damn mattress, knot you so good you’ll feel me in that pretty ass for days.” Jared’s long fingers reached down, brushing the top of his ass for emphasis and making Jensen suck in a breath. “And then I’ll do it all over again.”

“Promises, promises,” Jensen managed to respond through the melted remains of his brain. “I’ll believe you when I see you. And feel you,” he grinned suggestively, rolling his hips to brush against Jared’s bulging crotch.

Jared half groaned, half laughed, a rough sound that made Jensen bite down hard on his bottom lip.
“You’re a fucking tease, baby,” the Alpha complained good-naturedly, his voice hoarse.

“And you,” Jensen framed his boyfriend’s face with his hands, turning serious, “are the most amazing man in the world, and a mate I thank the stars for, every God damned day. You’re so much more than anything I could have ever thought to ask for, Jared Tristan Padalecki, and there’s nothing you could do that would embarrass me. Hank is going to love you, Jay, because he’s going to see what I see, every time I look at you.”

His Alpha was smiling now, one of the most beautiful sights in Jensen’s world. “What do you see, love?”

“My best friend,” Jensen murmured, “and the only man that I have ever loved.”

Jared exhaled with a shudder, pressing their foreheads together and capturing his lips in a far calmer series of little kisses, light and possessive and teasing. “You’re incredible,” he breathed between kisses, “and all mine. You’re mine forever.” Smirking against his lips, Jared added, “Even when you get so schmoopy and sweet that it gives me a toothache.”

Jensen flushed, fighting back amusement so that he could pull away and glare at his Alpha. “You’ve forced my hand, Jay,” he declared. After pausing dramatically, he delivered his punishment. “No sex for two weeks.”

Without waiting for an answer from his flabbergasted mate, Jensen began to walk, biting his lip to keep his smile from forming. Predictably, Jared was on his heels.

“Jen,” the Alpha implored in a sad little voice, “you don’t mean that, do you, baby? We’re just playing around?”

Jensen stayed resolutely quiet, walking briskly, and since Jared kept pace so easily, it took all his willpower not to break his expression and burst out laughing.

“Aw, sweetheart, don’t be like that.” Jared looked like a kicked puppy, the expression in his eyes aghast. “You know I’m just as sweet on you!”

He made a big deal of considering the words, pursing his lips and tilting his head as he walked. “One week,” he finally amended, still not looking at his Alpha because he knew he would grin the moment he did.

The taller boy seemed to have forgotten completely about his nerves, as Jensen suspected, as he fell into step next to him. Instead, Jared seemed intent on redeeming himself.

“You know you’re the love of my life, Jen.”

A few seconds passed and he steadfastly kept his mouth shut.

“You’re everything I never even knew I needed, baby,” Jared tried again.

The green-eyed artist was close to breaking, but he thought he could wrangle out one more sappy declaration from his lover.

Sure enough, Jared bounded a few steps in front of him before whirling around to face him, blocking his motion with gentle hands on his shoulders. “You’re my beautiful Beta mate,” the Alpha husked, his voice low as he closed the distance between their bodies. “I can’t even begin to imagine not having you, and I never want to.”
Finally, Jensen allowed his face to break into a smile, practically beaming at Jared with mischief sparkling in his eyes. “That’s better,” he chirped happily. “No sex until we get home.”

Jared chuckled, but the softness in his eyes made it clear that his words weren’t simply platitudes. Jensen couldn’t help but to lean in and brush their lips together once, twice, three times. Wanting to thank his Alpha for loving him, teaching him how to love.

But now wasn’t the time.

Glancing pointedly over Jared’s shoulder, Jensen smiled encouragingly. “Made it all the way to the house, Jay,” he teased gently. “Worst part’s over.”

The Alpha’s eyes widened as he turned to take in the ranch style house they stopped in front of. Allowing his lover to take in his fill, Jensen caught his big hand in his own and led him down the walkway. Hank was opening the door before they’d even reached the porch, assessing them with critical eyes, his protective-uncle face in full force.

Jensen rolled his eyes inwardly. “Hey, Uncle Hank,” he grinned easily. “S’great to see you again.”

He held out a hand, but the man who had been like a father to him in the brief time of his childhood didn’t hesitate to bat his arm away, pulling him in for a hug.

“I’m glad you came out, Kid,” Hank replied, the booming voice overflowing with affection. “I wasn’t sure you would’ve. Wouldn’t have blamed you either.”

“We’re family, Hank,” Jensen refuted lightly, missing the beaming look that came on to the older man’s face at his words. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily, not a second time.”

Hank shook his head. “Didn’t wanna get rid of you the first time, kiddo,” he mumbled, before returning his attention to Jared. “Who’s this?”

“This is Jared, my boyfriend,” he made the introduction, hiding a smirk at the way his Alpha instantly straightened his broad shoulders and held out a hand with a wide smile. His dimples cut into his cheeks and his hazel green eyes shone with warmth, and Jensen marveled at how much more youthful he looked in that moment, as opposed to the stress that had been present the past few months. “Jared, this is my uncle, Hank.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Sir,” Jared promptly offered, his voice earnest as he shook Hank’s hand. Despite the Alpha being on his best behavior, Jensen noted the suspicious look in his uncle’s eyes. Instantly, protective instincts swamped him, and he took an impulsive step towards Jared as his guard came up.

Turned out, he shouldn’t have worried.

“Handshakes, calling me Sir…I wonder how long it will be before Jen corrupts you, Jared,” Hank shook his head in mock sympathy.

Jared laughed, relaxing, and like a chain reaction, Jensen automatically calmed too. “How do you mean, Sir?”

“Well,” Hank grinned at him playfully, “everyone in the family knows that Jensen is the *demon child* of the Ackles clan. Hell, he was more of a terror than anyone on my side of the family too! The stories I could tell you, kid…”

Jared looked at him expectantly, his lips twitching as he waited for Jensen to defend himself. The
artist simply shrugged, adopting an aloof tone. “That’s devil child to you, Hank,” he corrected haughtily. “I cracked the top rung a long time ago.”

Jared let out a delighted laugh at Hank’s momentary speechlessness. Jensen smirked at the older man, watching as pride, amusement and affection drained away the shock.

“Come on in, Satan and company,” he chuckled ruefully. “I got plenty baby stories to make up for that little defeat.”

~*Jared*~

The man had an entire archive of baby stories.

Although his mate’s reactions wavered, varying from wildly embarrassed to amused to fond, Jared’s constant was utter happiness. Jensen had learnt so much about him from his family, and he’d been disappointed when no such meeting or discussion had taken place with his mate’s foster father.

Now he understood why.

But nevertheless, it was amazing to talk to someone who so clearly adored his lover; though they had been family for a brief two years, Hank seemed like he had a memory a day, all stored in his mind, dedicated to the green-eyed, freckled baby. Jared was more than receptive to the man’s retellings, soaking up the details like a sun-parched sponge, so eager and desperate was he to learn about the kind of baby his Jensen had been.

“Okay, okay,” he held up his hands, still trying in vain to shake off a bout of laughter that stemmed from a story involving an eighteen-month old Jensen, a zucchini and an intercom system. When he finally managed to get his laughter under control, his mate mock glaring at him the entire time, he posed his question. “In those two years, what’s your favorite story about him, Sir?”

Hank had taken to him like a moth to flame, thanks in large part to his honest earnestness during the standard “hurt-him-and-I’ll-kick-your-ass” conversation that had taken place between them when Jensen had gone to the kitchen to top up his soda. The man regarded him now with clear approval in his eyes, and Jared loved the feel of his mate’s happiness coming through their mating bond. It had been so long since such simple joy had touched his gorgeous Beta, and the Alpha was beyond pleased that he could bring some of it in the complicated turns their lives had taken.

“My favorite…” Hank mused, bringing him back to the present moment. Jensen was sporting a curious look now, teeth sinking into his bottom lip, intrigued despite himself. Jared spared a fond, secret smile at the reluctant attention his mate was paying, before refocusing on the older man. “That’s a difficult one, namely because there are so many…”

After a moment, his features cleared, and a brilliant, soft smile graced his features. “Although if I had to pick, I would say the day he first went to the park with his aunt and I, and his older brother Joshua.” Hank chuckled as he reminisced, missing the quick, involuntary glance that Jared shared with his mate at the mention of the brother that Hank still believed to be dead. “There was Josh, this little kid turned serious, protective big brother, and he takes one look at the size of the slide – which admittedly, probably seemed a lot bigger to them as kids – and he tells me and Kath that no way is he gonna allow Jensen to go on that slide. So naturally, I asked if he was scared, because there was no reason to be, and the kid tells me “Uncle Hank, we’re not scared. We Ackles’ are cautious folk.”
And before I can start to laugh at that, we’re all interrupted by Rambo-Jensen, hollering like a howler monkey as he takes off down the slide, on his belly!”

Jared chuckled at the picture his mind immediately conjured up, of a little boy with green eyes and freckles speeding down a slide with all the carefree joy of a toddler.

“I actually remember that,” Jensen laughed, wrinkling his nose. “I was thrilled to death with myself, never understood why Josh kept stopping me from going after that.”

“Poor kid ran himself ragged that day, trying to run after you and make sure nothing hurt you,” Hank laughed, his tone affectionate and slightly nostalgic. He returned his attention to Jared. “Jensen was always the daredevil of the two of them; always the bolder, braver one. He never shied away from anyone or anything, while Joshua was always more content to stop and think about a situation. Jensen just jumped in head-first, had this uncanny knack for picking up the basics as he went along.”

“Not much has changed there, Sir,” Jared grinned, winking teasingly at his mate. “He acts like and he thinks he’s invincible, and it’s hard to disabuse the notion, since I myself sometimes think he might be.”

Jensen smirked at him, the arrogance dripping from his words a harsh contradiction to the warmth in his eyes. “Don’t hate because I’m awesome, Jay.” His mate winked at him and Jared grinned contentedly.

This was the most peace they’d had in a while, and it was a welcome change to see his Beta relaxed and happy. As if by association, Jared’s Alpha was calm too, almost purring at the feel of his beloved mate’s good cheer over their bond. This visit had been a good idea; not only did Jensen not realize how much he had missed his uncle, but Jared also hadn’t realized how much he had needed to meet someone in his Beta’s family with a clean slate; to get approval for the man he was rather than to be instantly ostracized because of someone else damaging his name and reputation. That little niggling doubt that had always remained in the back of his mind was all but absent now; his belief that he could be a good mate was returned.

“We used to think as much too, sometimes,” Hank smiled a little grimly, “but we got a very painful reminder that he wasn’t untouchable.”

Jared frowned, his curiosity piqued. “How so?”

“He wandered off one day when we all went to the town fair,” the older man shuddered as he undoubtedly remembered the awful moments of frantic panic. “Most terrifying minutes the entire family had ever experienced. Shaved a couple years off my life.”

Jared felt ill with yet another reminder of how many things had conspired to take his Beta from him without them even meeting at all. The very thought of living a life that Jensen didn’t exist in, now, made him feel sick.

“I don’t remember that happening,” Jensen interrupted, looking bemused. “How old was I?”

Hank’s forehead creased as he thought back. “It was a few months after your second birthday. Actually, just about two weeks before the accident.”

Jared watched as his mate furrowed his brow, searching the deepest recesses of his memories, and he saw the moment Jensen grasped on to the fuzzy recollection.

“He had a limp,” came the muttered words. Jared felt anger flood him at the man he had never even met. “And a blue stuffed animal…an elephant.”
“Yes,” Hank flinched almost imperceptibly, anguish twisting his eyes. “What else do you remember?”

“Nothing after he pulled me away,” Jensen shook his head, and Jared felt the heaviness that had descended upon them lighten slightly. “I remember yelling for my dad…and then nothing.”

Jensen’s uncle took in a shaky breath. “He panicked when you screamed,” the man divulged. “I swear, I can still remember the way my blood froze when I saw him dragging you. He freaked out, threw you and ran. You hit your head on the edge of one of the rides when you fell…” Hank swallowed convulsively.

“Jesus…” Jared breathed, horror making his spine tingle. “Did he get hurt?” Jared’s hand found his mate’s, knowing that contact was the only thing that would keep his Alpha calm.

“There was so much blood…but miraculously, it was just a little scratch across his temple,” Hank answered. “I remember thinking you were dead,” he told his nephew grimly. “But your father got to you first, cleaned away the blood…he had more stomach than all of us. I still don’t know how he knew, how he was so sure that you weren’t really hurt all that badly.”

Jared read the thought that flashed across his mate’s face at the same time that the idea went through his own mind;

*Maybe Sean Ackles had used his own Shamanic abilities to save his son’s life that day.*

“Enough of that, though,” Hank waved a dismissive hand, looking eager to forget the bad memories. “Jen, would you mind checking on those steaks I put on? I want to check in the room and see if I still have all those baby photos of you to show Jared.”

Jensen stood up with a grumble and Jared beamed, excited to see the pictures Hank was talking about. His mate opened his mouth to complain, but the sound never came out.

Instead, Jared was treated to the blood-freezing visual of his Beta falling to the ground, muscles locked, with a look of pure agony gracing his features as a soundless scream became etched on Jensen’s beautiful face.

The most terrifying part of it was when Jared realized that while Jensen was spasming on the floor, he wasn’t breathing at all.

###

Chapter End Notes

Le gasp!! Hope y’all enjoyed, and for those of you with tumblr, drop me a follow or a line!!

@jaygirl88writes

-Much love!! Jupiter
Visions

Chapter Notes

Okay, I apologize so profusely for my absence! I took quite the tumble down some stairs (not as fun as it always looked in cartoons, just sayin’) and was hospitalized for a little while...but I'm back with a vengeance!

Hope y'all enjoy the chapter, and I'll update asap!

NB! JENSEN'S DREAM IS IN ITALICS, AND THE VISION IN THE DREAM IS IN BOLD ITALICS! Thank you!

Much love to all my amazing, faithful readers!! <3

Shout out to Maria, and Richivail, new readers! Welcome guys! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

Darkness.

Howling winds nearly bending the trees around him.

The feel of crunchy soil against his palm.

Jensen was no more in control of his vision than he had been any of the other times that he had experienced them, but maybe his body had become a little more accustomed to it, since he could distinctly control a thought outside the pulsating agony; fuck, no, not again. Not here. Not now. Not with them.

Of course, if Jensen could control these visions, he would have them at slightly less fucking inconvenient times.

Jeering and taunts filling the still air around him.

A woman’s malevolent cackle.

Black hair, and the dark eyes of the man he had protected all his life.

Hands were gripping at Jensen, something soft touching his head as frantic voices and pleas buzzed vaguely in the background of the vision.

Ripping pain.

Everywhere.

Hurts so much.
Can’t breathe.

Can’t breathe.

Can’t breathe...

Like at Jared’s party, the damned vision released him from its clutches only when he was a hair’s breadth from losing consciousness. He gulped in grateful lungfuls of air, choking and spluttering, tears streaming from his eyes.

Big hands rubbed soothing circles into his back, and he didn’t need to look to know that it was Jared. Sure enough, the rubbing continued even when Hank suddenly planted himself directly in front of him, one hand coming down to clasp his shoulder tightly. Slowly, the tunnel-like filter his vision had taken on blurred away, and the world outside of his own fatigued mind made itself known.

Jensen realized several things at once; he was surrounded by cushions on the floor, his uncle didn’t look nearly as freaked as he should…

…and the vision had shown him more than the last time.

He blinked owlishly, trying to force his mind into some semblance of discipline. It wouldn’t help to be thinking on everything all at once; it was sloppy and careless. He forced himself to focus, bringing his eyes to Jared’s, knowing that his Alpha’s familiarity would be the only thing that could remind him where he was; safe, always safe, with Jared.

Unlike Hank, frantic fear saturated Jared’s hazel orbs. Jensen reached out and weakly entwined their fingers, sending his emotions to his Alpha through their bond; regret at having not told him about the visions before, reassurance that he was okay, guilt for making him scared.

He watched as realization dawned on his mate’s face; the epiphany that Jensen wasn’t quite as panicked as he might have been if he didn’t know what was going on. That there was clarity in his eyes where there should have been confusion. That there was guilt inside of him where there should have been fear.

The pain that instantly flooded his Alpha was something he expected, but the distinct lack of anger left Jensen a little disconcerted.

“How many?” Hank’s voice jerked his attention away from the frozen Alpha. His uncle stood over him, an expression of grim worry on his face, and Jensen remembered the suspicious composure the older man was exuding. Questions swamped his still-cloudy brain.

His brow furrowed in confusion. “How many what?”

“How many times have you had these seizures?” Hank clarified, eyeing him shrewdly.

~*Jared*~

It was one thing that his mate wasn’t surprised by the spontaneous seizure, but it was a wholly different thing that Hank wasn’t.

Jared saw in his Beta’s eyes, that Jensen had experienced something of a…supernatural, variety. A vision, or a prophecy, or something resembling that. It had brought him intense pain to see that
Jensen had had this problem for a while; it made him realize just how much his mate had tried to protect him from as he strived for his normalcy those three weeks; but why and how did Jen’s very human uncle have any inkling of what he had just witnessed?

The Alpha knew that the same thoughts were going through Jensen’s befuddled mind, and he winced in sympathy as he imagined how much pain his lover was probably still going through. Attuning himself more attentively to the bond, he felt the residual agony making waves through Jensen’s body. It shouldn’t have surprised him, but it did when he realized that Jensen was hardly reacting to the pain, pushing it to the back burner in favor of sending Jared apologetic feelings of guilt and regret and sorrow.

Trying to work past his anger and protectiveness at Jensen’s high pain threshold, Jared kneeled next to his boyfriend and gathered him close into his chest, a comfort, a promise and absolution all at once. Releasing a gusty sigh that held his pent up nervousness, Jensen immediately scooted closer, seeking comfort in the security of his Alpha’s arms.

Maybe Hank sensed that they needed a moment, or maybe he just thought that Jared could persuade Jensen to answer his questions, but the older man nodded at him almost approvingly before quietly slipping into the kitchen. Once he was sure they were alone, the Alpha scooped his mate up into his arms, settling on the couch with Jensen arranged comfortably in his lap.

“I’m sorry,” Jensen apologized without preamble. “I should have told you, I know I should have. I just…”

“Wanted to protect me?” Jared guessed, interrupting gently. The green-eyed boy slumped a little more against him, nodding silently. “Baby…” Jared sighed, nuzzling the nape of his mate’s neck as he would have a chagrined pup. “I’m not mad. I just hate that you had so much to go through, and that you thought for even one second that I would have chosen a shred of normalcy, over being there for you during all of it. I know I was excited for us to have some down time, but did I really make you think that you couldn’t come to me with this?” He could hear the light note of pain still enduring in his calm voice, and he knew that Jensen did too.

Sure enough, Jensen burrowed closer still, tucking his face into the side of the Alpha’s neck.

“You’ve never made me feel like I couldn’t come to you,” he denied vehemently, “not ever. I just didn’t want to make you worry and stress, like you always seem to have to do with me. You were happy, Jay, I wanted you to stay that way.”

“I am happy,” Jared whispered into his Beta’s skin. He kissed the soft skin there, then nipped it slightly, as if in reprimand. “Every moment that I’m with you, I am. Don’t ever think otherwise, love. You’re my entire world, and then some…of course I’m going to worry over you. That doesn’t mean I’m not happy, it just means I’m very protective of my reason for being happy.”

He felt Jensen smile against his throat and the lingering tension in both their bodies dissipated. Fingers played softly with the strands of his hair, and the Alpha damn near purred at the feeling.

“It happened first about three and a half weeks ago,” his mate started without prompting, which somehow made Jared feel like he had accomplished something huge. “It was terrifying, but it happened only once, and I tried to forget about it. Then it happened again the night of your party, but that time I was slightly calmer. I managed to think it through, realize that it might have been some kind of vision, or a message to me through my Shamanic blood.”

“If it last happened at my party,” Jared’s brow knitted as he spoke, “that means the visions are coming closer together.”
The heavy sigh that escaped his mate’s plush lips told him that Jensen wasn’t blind to the implications of that. “Either I’m getting stronger in my abilities without really even knowing how, or…”

“Or what?”

“Or the message is getting more urgent,” his Beta finished grimly. “Like time is running out for me to be warned.”

A miniscule shudder broke across the Alpha’s frame and Jensen shuffled closer still, as though trying instinctively to battle Jared’s fears away. He tightened his arms around his precious mate, breathing in deeply to calm his nerves. “Jen…this is part of why you wanted to explore your abilities, isn’t it?”

Jensen nodded. “I need to make sense of this, Jay. I need to utilize every possible ace in my deck.”

“We,” the Alpha corrected absently, rubbing his thumb into the exposed skin of Jensen’s hip. “And we’ll find a way to figure this all out.”

“Starting with Hank.” The green-eyed artist straightened, aiming narrowed eyes at the door through which his uncle had disappeared a few moments ago. “He knows something, I know he does. He wouldn’t have been so calm if he didn’t.”

“I noticed that too,” Jared offered, mulling over the change that had come over the older man. His gut told him that Jensen’s uncle was not hiding anything from them, though, and Jensen had been the one to teach him to listen to his own instincts. “I don’t think he’s harboring any huge Shamanic secrets, baby,” he voiced his doubts hesitantly, realizing how difficult it was to trust his intuition without question. A rush of admiration for Jensen’s strength sidetracked him suddenly, but green eyes pinned on him brought him back to the present. “I’m just thinking,” he shrugged self-consciously, “that he didn’t seem shifty about it, even when he asked. He just seemed solemn.”

Jensen stared at him for a long moment and the Alpha resisted the urge to break the intense scrutiny. When a beaming smile broke out over his mate’s face, he relaxed, relishing in the pride that was now radiating through those powerful orbs.

“You’re going with your gut, even though it might not make sense,” Jensen grinned happily, swiftly and chastely kissing the edge of Jared’s jaw. “I’m proud of you, Alpha. You make a good point, too, since you see this one more clearly than me. I’m admittedly a little wary.”

Jared butted his mate’s temple with his nose. “You have every right to be. Especially given everything you’ve seen and been through.” A faint noise caught his sensitive hearing before he could continue, and he gently nudged his boyfriend’s hip. “Incoming. Anxious uncle at four o’clock.”

Jensen slipped off his lap and got shakily to his feet just as Hank loped through the doors. The older man’s features were tight with worry and he frowned when Jensen swayed slightly, weak on his feet.

“Sit back down, kiddo,” he instructed, his voice firm but gentle as he handed Jensen a glass. “Drink it all,” he prompted when Jensen peered into the tumbler curiously, “it’s only sugar water. It’ll help.”

Instead of drinking, Jensen composed his features to reflect only simple inquisitiveness. “How do you know?”

Jared hoped he was the only one who could hear the demanding undercurrent to the question.

“It was the only thing that used to help your dad whenever he had a seizure,” Hank answered gravely, concern etched on to his face. “He was always weak after, too.”
Jensen’s eyes flickered quickly to his, but his face remained carefully void of suspicion. “My dad?” he asked, eyes wide, and – Mother Luna – Jared himself almost believed the childlike innocence his mate exuded.

Jensen’s uncle nodded, sitting down heavily next to him. “He never told us what was wrong with him. I only ever saw him have an attack like that once, myself, but it wasn’t as severe as yours was. My best guess is that whatever illness he had, it was hereditary.”

Illness, Jared registered dimly. *He thinks this is some kind of human affliction. Back to square one.*

Jensen, having realized the same thing, relaxed from the almost invisible tension that had been gripping him, bringing the sugar water to his lips to drink deeply from it. Sure enough, some color gradually returned to his mate’s pale face, and it seemed like it wasn’t such an effort to keep upright anymore.

“I don’t want you to worry about this, kid,” Hank’s voice turned reassuring, comforting. “Your dad had an awesome doctor treating him, I remember him raving about the guy. He had apparently developed some kind of treatment plan for your dad, so the attacks became really rare. We’ll track him down, he can help.”

At those words, Jared’s interest piqued. He met his mate’s eyes, and he knew they were both thinking the same thing.

*Maybe not back to square one, after all.*

“Did Dad used to meet him at a hospital or something?” Jensen asked casually, still sipping the drink in his hand, shakiness now all but gone.

Hank’s brow furrowed faintly. “I would think so, but he never really mentioned where…we’ll just have to throw his name around and see what we come up with.” Looking eager to change the subject, probably in a naïve attempt to keep Jensen from thinking on his “illness”, Hank suddenly smiled. “All this thinking about the past though, got me to remembering something I want you to have, Kid.”

He held up a plain, black leather strap that had an odd sort of tribal design cut into it. It looked like a wrist cuff, the decorative kind, and the wear on it was barely visible. A quick look at Jensen’s face told him that the item’s significance was lost on his mate as well, and he was happy to let things play out before he offered any comment.

“It was your mom’s,” Hank’s gentle voice explained, and a small sound got stuck at the back of Jensen’s throat. Jared stepped closer to his lover, giving him space but reminding him that he was there. “Your Aunt Katherine had it after she died.”

“Aunt Katherine…” Jared hoped he was the only one that heard the slight undercurrent in Jensen’s voice. “She gave it to you?”

“No, she gave it to a friend of hers. Maddie something. She came to give it back to me after Kath died,” Hank explained, a pained look coming across his face. “She said she thought it should stay in the family.”

Jared felt badly for him, and he was actually thankful that the older man was under the impression Katherine had died nine years ago.

Jensen accepted the bracelet with a soft smile, a look of wonder crossing his green eyes as he traced the shapes that were carved into it. Jared wordlessly took it from his hands, reaching around to gently
hook the cuff around his mate’s wrist. The green-eyed boy admired it silently for a moment, doubtlessly overwhelmed with feeling for the woman he never really got to know.

“She really loved you, kid,” Hank offered quietly. “Your mom? She used to say Joshua was her little man, but you were her angel baby.”

A small hitch caught Jensen’s breath, but the smile on his face was nothing short of beatific.

“Thank you, Hank.”

It was all the words his mate could manage, Jared knew, but judging from the look on the older man’s face?

That was all the words that were really needed.

~*Jensen*~

“Mikhail Ozera.” Jensen tested the name out, feeling the way it rolled off his tongue. “It even sounds like a mentor-y name.”

Jared chuckled indulgently from the seat next to him, deftly maneuvering the Impala on to the highway. Jensen grinned, a touch of excitement competing with the stress inside him, as he idly fingered the patterns on his leather cuff. They had a name. It was more than they had expected when they went to visit Hank.

He’d waited until after dinner before he interrogated his uncle. After a vague explanation about one of his friends working in a hospital who could ask around, Jensen had managed to wrangle the “doctor’s” name - Mikhail Ozera - from him. He had no doubt that the man had somehow helped his father control the visions, or at least interpret them so that they weren’t as frequent. It only made him feel slightly guilty as he lied to Hank, promising to call him as soon as they found the man, or someone better.

Now, as they were en route home, the development impressed itself upon him once more, leaving him a little less stressed and a little more accomplished. He knew they were still far ways away from the truth, but even a step closer was a lot more than they had been in the past few days.

“How does a name sound mentor-y?” Jared asked, his voice teasing as he reached out to rest his hand against Jensen’s knee.

“Ask Mr. Miyagi, or Yoda, or Alex Hitchens, or Charles Xavier,” he shrugged, twining their fingers together. “I don’t make the rules.” He scrunched his forehead for a moment, contemplating, then turned a bright grin on his boyfriend. “I’d be an awesome protégé,” he announced decisively.

“Cool your jets, love,” Jared laughed, squeezing his hand. “You agreed; no wax-on-wax-off gig until after Dean runs this guy’s background.”

Jensen pursed his lips in thought. “Even if he was a convicted felon, he’s still our best, and only lead,” he pointed out helpfully. Jared narrowed his eyes in response.

“Then we find another lead.”
Jensen knew his Alpha, and he knew that plan wasn’t up for discussion. Rather than feeling smothered and babied, like he thought he would have felt, Jensen felt protected and cherished. Instead of focusing on the stubborn set to Jared’s jaw, he found himself noticing the protective flash in his hazel-green eyes.

In that moment, he swore inwardly to try to start taking better care of and caution with himself and his actions. Jared loved him so much; the least he could do, was make sure he always came back to him.

“Okay,” he nodded seriously, acquiescing with uncharacteristic ease. Sure enough, Jared frowned suspiciously, glancing at him in surprise.

“Just like that?” the Alpha asked skeptically. “No indignant protests?”

Jensen had to snicker at the look his lover was sporting. “No indignant protests,” he confirmed with a grin. “I know you’re looking out for me. I’m gonna try to make that easier on you.”

The tender smile that he got in response made it worth the display of maturity he showed. Jared brought Jensen’s knuckles to his lips for a small kiss. “Thank you, love,” he murmured. “On that note… do you think you could tell me what exactly you’re seeing in these visions?”

“I wish I could give you a clear picture,” the green-eyed artist huffed in frustration. “There’s just a whole lot of fleeting images, and feelings, and sounds…I can’t much make sense of it myself.”

“Is it the same every time?”

“No,” Jensen shook his head slowly in response, “it isn’t. Well, okay, technically, it is, but the more it happens, the more I see. Like, with every vision, I get another little piece of the puzzle.”

His Alpha began rubbing circles into his thumb, and Jensen wasn’t sure if the action was meant to comfort him, or Jared himself.

“What did you see today?”

The vivid images flashed behind Jensen’s eyelids. “It was dark, and windy…I was in a forest of some kind. I could feel soil underneath me. There were people…a man and a woman, they were mocking me. I recognized the man,” he realized suddenly, shivering at the remembered feeling of betrayal and agony. “Black hair, dark eyes…I knew him, I’d protected him, I loved him…” Another shudder rocked his frame and he unconsciously tightened his grip on Jared’s hand. His breathing picked up a shade of a pace as he felt a hollow ache in his chest that throbbed with pain, threatening to consume him. “Then there was just this…God, this awful, searing pain, like I was being put through a shredder. I couldn’t breathe, almost as though there were something pressing against my chest…it hurt so much…I couldn’t breathe, Jared, I couldn’t…”

Dimly, his mind registered that his breath was now coming out in choppy pants; panic, and the pungent smell of fear of death cloying his senses. He wasn’t in the vision any longer, but the intensity of the recollection made him feel like he was.

“Breathe, sweetheart,” Jared’s hot, moist breath was suddenly right next to his ear, cutting through the dull, roaring sound of blood rushing through his body. Warmth enveloped him and without conscious thought, he clung desperately on to his Alpha’s t-shirt, trying to ground himself, trying to tear himself from the feelings he knew weren’t present at that moment. “Shh,” Jared was whispering, urging him closer, big arms wrapping around him like a protective blanket, “it’s okay, love, I’m here. I’m right here, and you’re here with me. Nothing is happening to you, nothing is gonna happen to
Each word brought him closer, back to reality. That awful ache dulled gradually, as his Alpha kept whispering promises to him, leaving Jensen spent. He slumped against Jared when the almost-vision finally released him, exhaustion running deep in his bones. He loosened his death grip on his boyfriend’s shirt, his hand instead finding the spot over Jared’s heart. The strong thumping against his palm soothed him, reminded him of who he was with. Unbidden, a harsh spike of fear zinged through him as he contemplated for the first time, the possibility that he was losing his mind. Swallowing hard against the terror, he forced himself to bury the thought and get back to his mate.

Jared kept up the soft reassurances, one big hand traversing his back and the other tracing light patterns across his hip. After a few minutes, he asked, almost inaudibly, “Was it a vision?”

“No,” Jensen breathed, fighting lethargy, “more like…an induced memory. All the feelings were there. I just didn’t see anything, and the pain wasn’t as intense, just present.” He shut his eyes tightly, trying to immerse himself in his Alpha. *Damn it all, when is it going to end…?*

Jared made a small, hurt little sound in the back of his throat. “I’m so sorry, love,” he murmured ardently, burying his face in Jensen’s hair. “I won’t make you remember again, I won’t put you through that again. I had no idea it would hurt you, love, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Neither of us knew,” he refuted tiredly, using all his energy to shift his head to the right and press his lips clumsily against Jared’s throat. “It’s okay. You have to know what I see. We’ll take it slower…next time.”

A numb feeling, like he was floating just above his body, overcame him, his eyelids dragged down as a mammoth yawn burst through him.

“Tired,” he managed to slur, feeling a chuckle rumble through his Alpha’s chest, dispelling the tension in his frame. “Sleep,” he decided faintly, succumbing to the pull of unconsciousness.

The last thing he felt, was Jared’s lips against his forehead, before he was pulled into sleep.

~*Jared*~

It only took a few seconds before Jensen’s breathing evened out, and only once Jared was sure his mate was asleep, did he allow the raggedy breath he’d been holding in to escape.

He had been terrified when Jensen suddenly gripped his hand, obviously struggling once more to take in a breath. It wasn’t like at the house; he didn’t seem trapped in agony, and his muscles didn’t lock up, but there was still clear fear in his emerald eyes; fear that Jared hoped he’d never have to see again. He’d wrenched the Impala on to the side of the road and gathered his mate up in his arms, but it was that painful moment when he realized there was nothing else he could do. The battle was inside Jensen, in his mind, and Jared was powerless to do anything but hold him and whisper words of comfort. Those few beats before Jensen had regained control had passed like lifetimes, and the Alpha had never before felt so scared and helpless.

It took a massive effort for him to let go of his precious mate, but he knew they needed to get moving. They had promised their friends to meet up at the club later, so Jen could collect the keys and to make up for them missing Ditch Day, but now? Jared wasn’t sure he would be able to do anything except bundle Jensen up in blankets and hold him for the rest of the night to make sure that...
nothing got to him again. Their friends would just have to suck it up.

He gently maneuvered him so that Jen was lying across the bench seat, his head pillowed on Jared’s thigh, and his mate moved easily, pliant and sleepy. Giving himself a moment to get composed, he absently carded his fingers through Jensen’s silky hair, before eventually, carefully pulling back on to the road.

Thankfully, it was an easy drive, and Jared for the most part kept one hand on the wheel, and another resting against his lover’s chest, reassuring himself with the steady rise and fall that he felt there. He occasionally traced light patterns, or removed his hand completely when he had to change gears, but the other boy stayed asleep through all of it, a testament to how drained the kind-of-vision had left him.

The Alpha mulled on what his boyfriend had told him, trying to piece the scattered visions together, wondering what it all meant. Was it Jensen himself in the vision, or was it someone else? And if it was someone else, was it a warning for the future or was it a memory from the past? And how did the visions come about, anyway? How was this Ozera guy gonna help Jen control it?

The thoughts swam around and around in his mind, giving him a headache. He didn’t know how his mate had managed to deal with all of this for so long, and on his own no less. His phone buzzed insistently from his pocket, pulling him from his twisting thoughts. Fumbling clumsily, it took a few seconds before he managed to reach it without dislodging Jensen or crashing the car, and it was with no small measure of triumph that he finally swiped a thumb across the screen. He set it on the dashboard, putting it on speakerphone to free his hand, safe in the knowledge that Jensen was out for the count.

“Yeah?”

“Do you answer the phone to your momma like this, Jay-rod?”

Jared grinned at the mock-affronted tone of his best friend. Chad was a goofball at the worst of times, but the blonde had taken it upon himself to bring some lighter times to the stress of the past few days, and that combined with Ditch Day made him a man on a mission.

“Your fugly ass on my caller ID showed me it wasn’t my momma,” he shot back teasingly. “Wonders of modern technology, my friend.”

“That’s it!” Chad declared imperiously, sniffing in mock affrontation. “Get me Jensen, Jay-rod, I’m done with you! He’s always nicer to me!”

The Alpha immediately sobered, glancing down at the pale and drawn face of the love of his life. Despite the peace he saw there, it pained him to also see the tiredness and pain that seemed present even in sleep in the green-eyed beauty.

As though Murray had sensed the serious turn things had taken in his mind, Chad’s voice became quieter. “Jared?” Just one word, but after being best friends as long as they were, the Padalecki heir could hear all the questions packed into that softly-spoken address.

“Jen’s asleep, Chad…” he trailed off hesitantly, wondering whether he would be betraying his mate’s trust if he told his best friend about the visions. “He’s been having a rough time,” he finally settled on a half-truth, sighing gustily. “He kept it from me the past few weeks, but he’s been having a real go of things, it took a bigger toll than I think even he expected.”

“What’s on his mind?” Chad’s enquiry was soft and concerned, a rare moment of solemnity for the
blond.

Jared absently thumbed Jensen’s skin through the gap between the shirt’s buttons. “Things from his past,” he hedged, after a moment of hesitation. “He wants to learn about his parents, among other things. And he’s been turning all his worries and concerns inwards for three weeks. It all sort of came out today.”

“That doesn’t sound promising,” his best friend noted mildly. “Please tell me you had enough sense not to guilt him about it. He has more than enough to worry over if what you say is true, and we both know that fighting with you messes him up more than anything else.”

A reluctant smirk found its way to the Alpha’s face. It never failed to amuse and astound him just how much Chad seemed to be protective over his mate; despite the fact that they were best friends, Jared knew the blonde would never hesitate to defend Jensen, even against Jared himself. It gave him a measure of comfort to know that; his Beta deserved everyone’s unwavering loyalty, and the more people that were protective over him, the happier Jared was.

“I was perfectly supportive and gentle,” he assured his friend, rolling his eyes before sparing a fond glance for his unconscious lover. “He’s always trying to shield me from anything remotely difficult, and how can I be upset with him for that, considering it’s the very same thing I try to do for him?”

A dry snort erupted from the other end. “Why didn’t you ask yourself this question when you blew up at him about his foster father?” The rhetorical question was without accusation or malice; just simple, if somewhat disapproving, exasperation.

“Yeah,” the middle Padalecki flinched, a familiar beat of regret pulsing through him, “that probably would have been a good idea.”

“Yeah, well, we all know that having good ideas is more Jen’s speed than your own, Jay-Pad.” Chad’s smirk could be heard from his light, amused tone. “Except of course when it comes to his own well-being. Then he thinks things through logically, about as much as a mountain troll that’s high on dope.”

Jared blinked, torn between laughter and a disbelieving huff. “Where the fuck do your analogies come from, Murray?” he finally asked flatly.

Chad barked a laugh and a begrudging smile quirked the Alpha’s lips up. “The scary place that is my head, brother,” he answered flippantly.

Jared chuckled to himself, carding his fingers through his mate’s thick hair when Jensen stirred. The Alpha stayed quiet for a few moments while his lover settled, content to listen to Chad ramble on about the club. His attention drifted off to Jensen as he watched him reach his hand down subconsciously to grip the cuff around his wrist between his fingers. Jensen calmed quickly as he rubbed the worn leather, unaware of his actions or of Jared’s rapt gaze upon him, and the Alpha’s heart broke when he realized how much Jensen was probably missing the mother he had never gotten to know.

“…and also, I’m pregnant with Abel’s illegitimate love-child.”

Jared blinked rapidly, coming back to the present with Chad’s words. “What the fuck?!”

“I can’t believe I had to go that far before you started listening again,” Chad deadpanned, but Jared could hear the underlying amusement in the blonde’s tone. “Is it Jensen?”

The Alpha sighed, his momentary levity forgotten. “Yes,” he said simply, hard pressed to elaborate.
It seemed he didn’t need to.

“You take care of your boy, I’ll handle the groupies. We’ll see you both at school tomorrow. Give Jensen a very manly hug from me.”

Jared just swallowed hard, thinking of how he could possibly thank his best friend for knowing exactly what he needed, when he needed it.

Chad just hung up the phone, hearing with perfect clarity what he knew his friend couldn’t voice out loud.

~*Jensen*~

**Darkness.**

*Howling winds nearly bending the trees around him.*

*The feel of crunchy soil against his palm.*

Jensen tensed, waiting for the excruciating pain. He was startled enough to open his eyes when the agony never materialized.

Dreaming, he realized belatedly. *I’m dreaming. This isn’t a vision.*

Relief made his breath hitch and his muscles momentarily turn to Jell-O, and Jensen took the reprieve as a chance to investigate a little. It might have bothered him if he stopped to question why he was so consumed by these mysterious visions that they started manifesting themselves in his dreams, but as it was, Jensen was just that – consumed.

Somehow, he knew. Deep inside him, in a place untouched by logic and reason, he knew that these visions meant something more. That they were the key to unlocking the puzzle he had been working on since that fateful night when the Padalecki pack was almost ambushed by the Morgan pack. In the throes of his so-called clairvoyant episodes, he was always in far too much pain to comprehend more than what his first glances presented to him. After years of being JR, though, Jensen knew that seeing things at face-value, often meant that whole dimensions were being missed out on, hidden by the illusion of what people wanted to project.

He had learned to survive by looking past those fragile facades to the deeper truths within, and there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that he had to do the same thing with this.

*The first thing he realized was that he was in a forest. He could only tell through the darkness because it looked remarkably similar to the forest that held his and Jared’s clearing, but there wasn’t enough light to find any distinguishing marks that would narrow down its location.*

*A flash of brown and amber.*

*Jeering and taunts filling the still air around him.*

*A woman’s malevolent cackle.*

*The dark eyes of the man he had protected all his life.*
The mere silhouette of a figure, hunched inwards, broken sounds ripping from his body.

With a shock, Jensen realized that he had never seen the other man before; never seen him, because he was him. He had watched every vision through that man’s eyes. He strained to get closer, dying to catch a glimpse of any of their faces, that might tell him where to start looking. He struggled fruitlessly, realizing that he was stuck in place; virtually paralyzed. Forced to bear witness to this from a third party perspective but without the advantage of positioning himself.

If this is my dream, why the hell can’t I move myself? He wondered irritably.

His attention was swiftly diverted to the scene in front of him when the figure on the floor began to speak.

“I trusted you!” he rasped, agony of both a physical and emotional nature evident in his voice. “I loved you! I… I loved you…and you…you took everything from me…how could you?”

Jensen’s heart ached in sympathy, wanting to reach out to the man, shield him from the malevolent man and jeering woman who seemed intent on causing as much pain as possible.

“Loved me?” the other man sneered, his cold voice completely devoid of remorse. “There is no such thing as love in this world we call ours. You always were the weaker of us, believing in such naïve notions. No, there is only power, and I am the only one worthy of wielding it.”

Despite his obvious pain, the figure hunched over scoffed. “Worthy?! You deem yourself worthy? You have set us all on course to be led straight into cataclysmic warfare! We will be destroyed!”

“We will be the destroyers!” For the first time, the darkness-shrouded man spoke with fervor, his voice turning shrill with indignation. “You and your short-sighted endeavors were our biggest downfalls! I will show them all what a true leader is!”

“You think a leader would sacrifice his family? Would allow his children to be butchered in the name of pride and patrimony? Would allow homes to be destroyed simply because he has to feed his ego?”

As if a switch had been flipped in the evil man’s mind, there was no temper forthcoming. Silence reigned for a few painful beats, before his dark chuckle filled the air.

“What is the worth of the opinion of a dying man?”

Jensen, watching in abject horror, suddenly knew what he was about to see.

Another flash as the wolf burst from its human skin, teeth bared and aimed at the crouching man’s jugular.

“WATCH OUT!” Jensen screamed instinctively, trying to reach out to the man, warn him somehow. Dark eyes turned his way, his face shadowed in darkness, and for a crazy second, Jensen almost believed the man could see him.

His stomach rolled as he realized the hunched man wasn’t going to survive. Even so, he couldn’t help his shout.

“No, ST-...”
“…-OP!”

His scream materialized as he sat bolt upright, heart pounding in his chest like it was trying to burst straight through his rib cage. He barely registered Jared, and the Alpha’s frantic words and hands as he tried to offer comfort, so caught up was he in what he had just seen.

*I trusted you! I loved you!*

The words played on a loop in his head, drowning out both the sound of his mate and his own thoughts.

All but one.

*Betrayed.*

###

Chapter End Notes

Hope y'all enjoyed! &lt;3
A worthy successor indeed

Chapter Notes

This chapter WHIPPED MY EVER-LOVING ASS.

I rewrote it about 78 times (no joke) and I'm still hesitant to post, because these interactions are important to Jensen, damn it, and I'm spazzing out because I may have messed it up, and...

Deep breaths. Okay. I apologize with all my heart for the crazy delay in posting this, lovelies. As mentioned, this chapter was very difficult for me to write, not least of all because of my personal drama. Regardless! It is here, and due to a lack of a steady internet connection, I am skiving off the neighbor's WiFi. Heehee.

I'm so sorry to everyone who reviewed, for not replying! As soon as Monday arrives, and I have a tech come in and fix my internet, I shall reply to everyone in kind. Please accept my humblest apologies and THANKS SO MUCH FOR THE LOVELY ENCOURAGEMENT! I love you all more than you know!

Special shout out to faegal04! Welcome to the story, hon, and thank you so much for all your feedback! It is much appreciated <3 Welcome once again!

I hope y'all enjoy this one! Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

Why was it that every single time Jared thought he had a good idea, it somehow ended up with Jensen in tears?

*Jesus Christ, way to give a man a complex.*

A complex, however, was the least of the Alpha’s concerns, as his Beta shot upright in bed, screaming out. While the words were unintelligable, the terrified tone was unfortunately unmistakable.

His arms went immediately around his precious mate, trying in vain to offer comfort against an invisible assailant. Jensen was panting, clutching at him desperately in an action Jared knew to be unconscious. His green eyes were wide and grief-stricken, focused on something only he could see, trapped in the recesses of his mind where Jared couldn’t reach.

*How much longer is this gonna go on?* Jared thought wildly, losing his fleeting grip on calm for a moment. *It’s killing him.*

The very thought stopped Jared cold. As much as it was a thought his mind had conjured while running from him, that didn’t mean there wasn’t a grain of truth to it.
These visions were killing Jensen. Not directly, no, but how many more sleepless nights and secondary trauma and mind-melting metaphysical agony could Jen’s body take? Just because the pain was an illusion, didn’t mean his lover wasn’t feeling every single damn ache and twinge. And what was worse, there was no way for Jensen to share this burden that didn’t also cause him inevitable hurt.

His mate was going through torture. And all Jared could do was hold him tight and try to keep Jensen with him.

“Jensen…” he finally lowered his voice to a raw whisper that somehow seemed to catch his Beta’s attention in the way his hollered pleas hadn’t. “Love…”

All at once, Jensen sagged against him, hands coming up to grip his forearms, which were banded across the Beta’s muscled chest. His lover turned into his neck, soft breaths puffing fast and irregular over the sensitive skin.

They sat for a moment in silence, only the sound of Jensen’s ragged pants and Jared’s deep breathing permeating the air. Jared searched desperately for something to say, anything that he thought might make his lover feel better, but he was coming up woefully short.

~*Jensen*~

I trusted you! I loved you!

Jensen paid next to no attention to the chemicals sitting on the lab desk in front of him. His motions were mechanical, practiced, and not for the first time, he was grateful for the expertise he’d accumulated after almost always being in AP Chem.

You took everything from me!

Even as his hands measured out quantities with utmost precision, even as his fingers adjusted the heat coming from the burner, he was still trapped in his head. A prisoner to the voice in his dream, that he’d heard only once, but had followed him through to reality more than any of his visions had.

We will be destroyed!

Destroyed!

What is the worth of the opinion of a dying man?

I trusted you…

“JENSEN!”

His body jerked violently, knee banging against the desk as Chris’ loud voice finally penetrated his awareness. Hissing in pain, Jensen took a moment to be thankful that none of the chemicals and reactants on his and Jared’s workspace had dropped, before directing his attention to his worried friend and his equally troubled Alpha. The loud bark of his name had attracted some attention and heat flooded his cheeks.

“Yes, Christian?” he asked irritably as he rubbed his sore knee with his hand. He knew that his best
friend and brother hardly deserved his tone; knew that his own focus had been entirely off, and that Chris was simply trying to catch his attention. But the lack of a decent night’s sleep since they’d come back, combined with the dream that haunted plenty of his waking moments, as well as the way Jared had been acting all careful with him…it put Jensen in a really bad headspace.

He had always hated being treated differently, and as much as he loved his Alpha, he couldn’t stand Jared seeing him as something fragile. As *breakable*. It was torture to him, and for fear of aggravating it, he hadn’t tried to explain his nightmare to the Alpha either. That he was bottling those feelings up, really didn’t help his patience levels, but he didn’t trust Jared not to try to hole them up in the cottage in the interest of keeping him safe. He knew that his boyfriend was acting out of love; he could even appreciate how much he meant to Jared. But that didn’t lessen the hurt that came from the knowledge that Jared thought he couldn’t handle this. The Alpha had believed in him when he didn’t believe in himself, and having that taken away…it made all his doubts come back.

Maybe he *really wasn’t* strong enough.

Maybe he *was* just a liability to the pack.

Maybe he was deluding himself, thinking that his Shaman blood was anything but a curse.

It was those kind of thoughts that made it a little bit easier to hold on to his irritation in the face of someone underserving of it.

Kane didn’t seem too affected by it, however. “What’s going on with you, man? I know you can do this experiment in your sleep, but you can’t actually go to sleep. You were stuck in your head for ages, what are you thinking on?”

Jensen averted his eyes, pointedly returning to the experiment. “Nothing,” he replied shortly, adding the last reactant to the beaker. There wasn’t even any sense of accomplishment or triumph to be had when the liquid bubbled and emitted a green-ish steam, exactly the way it was supposed to. “Just paying attention to the work.”

“Really?” his friend asked skeptically. Jared didn’t even have to say anything; Jensen could feel the sad, kicked-puppy look his Alpha was sporting. “And you spacing out has *nothing* to do with the weird nightmare Jared said you had? And the visions that you didn’t bother telling us about?”

The initial burn of disloyalty – that Jared had shared his secret with their friends without running it by him first – was harsh. He couldn’t stop his hurt look as his head snapped to look at Jared, and remorse quickly filled the familiar hazel eyes. Rationally, he knew that Jared was worried, and he knew that sharing the information was probably what he would have done anyway, but he was still hurting about Jared treating him like fine china. To him, at that moment, it just felt like even more proof that Jared didn’t trust him to manage his own situation.

“*Nothing* to do with *anything,*” he bit out, before Jared could speak; before he could apologize or defend his actions. Determinedly, he set his hard eyes on Chris instead. “And *nothing* to do with y’all. I can handle my own shit; in case y’all have forgotten, I’ve done it for *years* before I came here.”

Without waiting for a response, he slammed his book shut and slung his backpack over his shoulder. He avoided Beaver’s eyes as he handed his report in and walked straight out of the lab, not once turning back.

It only took him a few strides before he felt guilt creep up on him. Chris didn’t deserve the tongue-lashing, and Jared didn’t deserve the anger. They were all trying to look out for him, the way family
did; and they were just that. They were a family. Jensen just couldn’t stand how little he brought to that family, as opposed to how much danger he placed them in.

Fingers closed around his elbow, jerking him back to reality. However, instead of being met with the sight of his Alpha, or Chris, he was met with the short blonde spikes and blue eyes of his other brother.

“What do you want, Chad?” he asked tiredly. “Jared and Chris struck out, so they sent in the cavalry?”

The blonde scrutinized him for a long minute, before his eyes narrowed in concern and a frown marred his features. “When’s the last time you slept, Green Eyes?” Chad’s tone was neither pitying, nor demanding, and for some reason, that soothed the artist’s ruffled feathers.

Jensen sighed, rubbing a palm roughly over his face. “Last night.”

“Let me rephrase that,” the alpha gave him a knowing look. “When’s the last time you slept more than 2 or 3 hours?”

Busted. “Um…since Ditch Day,” he finally answered, reluctantly.

Chad whistled lowly. “Since you came back from visiting your uncle,” he added. “Since your nightmare. That was two weeks ago.”

For some reason, Chad’s even tone, and the way he wasn’t pushing for details, lowered Jensen’s guard. Nodding slowly, he slumped against the row of lockers on his right. “I’m so fucking tired, man,” he muttered. “I just…I just want to sleep.” Wordlessly, Chad sat on the floor against the lockers next to him.

“You been having that nightmare again?”

“No!” He couldn’t help the frustrated tone he’d taken on. “I haven’t had the fucking nightmare, not since the first time, and that’s what drives me crazy! The only reason I’m not sleeping is because I’m so fucking tired of being caught up in those images, in those feelings. I won’t let myself sleep, because I dread having to live through that every God damned night, which I know I will if I let myself sleep long enough.”

Chad was silent for a few moments, but to his credit, the alpha didn’t seem freaked. Just thoughtful.

“Why is this so different from any other dream?” the alpha finally asked, hitting the nail on the head with that single question.

Keeping his gaze on a spot above Chad’s shoulder, Jensen shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m just sick of it.”

If Chad caught on to his lie, he didn’t show it.

“You know, Jared and Chris…they’re worried about you.” A curious glint entered his eyes and he lowered his voice. “Do you understand how much you mean to them? To all of us?” The question wasn’t accusatory, although it maybe should’ve been. Instead, it was an honest inquiry, like Chad wasn’t sure whether they’d told him enough, or showed him how much he meant to them.

The guilt amplified and Jensen squirmed, though he knew that wasn’t Chad’s intention. “I’m not a child,” he muttered instead, pretending like he hadn’t heard the muted question. “They don’t need to worry over me.”
“No one said you were a child,” the blonde replied patiently, getting to his feet and dusting his jeans off. “And when people love you, they worry over you. Case in point, Jared, Chris, myself and the pack.”

Before he could think of how to respond, he found himself being pulled back to his feet and wrapped in a hug. His shock only lasted a second before he hugged Chad back; it was a rare thing for the blue-eyed alpha to be serious in his affection, and to be honest, Jensen kind of needed the silent comfort of the alpha and brother that seemed to know him more than anyone else, save for Chris and Jared.

“Get some sleep, Green Eyes,” came the soft directive once they’d ended the embrace. “Things will look better once you do.”

Nodding wordlessly, Jensen ducked his head to hide the single tear that fell from his eye.

###

“Don’t you have class right now?”

Jensen started at the familiar voice, whirling around as a blush crept on to his face. “Afternoon, Ma’am. And no, I’ve actually got a few free periods.”

Sherry Padalecki smiled and for some reason, Jensen found himself relaxing. “Honey, you still look far too thin,” she chided playfully, by way of greeting, hugging him. “And you look like you haven’t got a decent night’s sleep in ages!”

Jensen opened his mouth to reply, but found the words stuck in his throat. All of a sudden, he didn’t feel like putting on a show, or making vague and poor excuses for the fact that he looked like crap warmed up.

“It’s been a crazy time, of late, Mrs. Padalecki,” he finally managed to reply, his voice sounding tired even to his own ears. “I guess it’s just now catching up with me. I needed to get away for a little bit.”

Also, I’m kind of hiding from your son because he’s been looking for him since I had an outburst at him and Chris in our Chemistry class…but hey, you don’t really need to know that.

Sherry sat down slowly next to him, her speculative eyes making Jensen flush under the attention, but surprisingly, didn’t make him feel like he was being judged or evaluated.

Rather, it felt like being cared for by an overprotective mother.

It had been long years since he felt it, but he had never forgotten that feeling.

Finally, the Beta gave a small sigh, smiling sadly as she gestured haphazardly at the place – Lookout Peak, the sign said, – that they were at. “I sometimes need to hide out, too. Our mates are our souls’ counterpoints, but sometimes it can become a bit much, huh?”

A jolt of shock went through Jensen, and before he thought about it, he was hastening to reassure his lover’s mother. “I love Jared, Ma’am, I swear that it has…”

“Hush, honey,” Sherry waved a dismissive hand, taking up a comforting tone. “A blind man could
see that you love my son more than life itself. But I understand what it’s like to be an independent, strong person; the adjustment to an overbearing and protective mate can be difficult. I know it was for me.” She winked conspiratorially at him. “I nearly smothered Gerald with a pillow at least seven times before things settled down between us.”

To his surprise, a laugh bubbled up effortlessly inside him. “Only seven?” he asked cheekily, shedding some of the tension from his shoulders without being fully aware of it.

It was Sherry’s turn to laugh. “I know, honey. I have the self-restraint of a saint.”

They shared a smile and fell into a comfortable sort of silence, in which Jensen was trying to contemplate how to explain his feelings to the Beta, and Sherry was kindly giving him the space in which to do it.

“I love Jared,” Jensen finally started softly, “and I love that he wants to protect me from anything that will hurt me. But lately, it sort of feels like he’s got no faith in me. Like he sees me as different now, as breakable, because of what those visions are putting me through.” He ran a frustrated hand through his hair, huffing a breath. “He’s treating me like that because he loves me, I know that, but why can’t he see, that what I need from him, is for him to believe in me? The way he always has?”

“You’re worried that if Jared has no faith in you, then maybe he has a reason to.”

The perceptive observation threw Jensen slightly, but it was also like a weight was taken off his shoulders by the very proof of someone knowing his concern. It was like putting his fears out in the open, made them less real, somehow. Less scary.

“Sounds pathetic out loud,” he sent her a sheepish half-smile, “but I guess so.” He paused for a moment before adding, in a self-deprecating tone, “Maybe they were right about me all along.”

Sherry furrowed her brow, an expression uncannily similar to Jared. “Who was, sweet pea?”

“Everyone,” Jensen muttered, hunching in on himself slightly. “Everyone who ever thought that I wasn’t worth it.”

He had expected a variety of responses from the Beta; yelling, muted agreement, a dismissal of some kind…

…what he didn’t expect, was a soft hand to cup his cheek and turn his face with the gentleness of a mother. He didn’t expect Mrs. Padalecki to lock eyes with him, a tender expression on her face, and lean forward to kiss his forehead.

But then, Padalecki’s very rarely did what he expected of them.

“Jensen, honey,” Sherry spoke softly but firmly. “I don’t ever want you to think that, not for a hot minute. You are a part of this pack, and a part of this family, and the biggest part of Jared’s heart. You do not get to be as important as you are to us, without being worth more than your weight in gold. Do you understand me?”

Extraordinarily, he did.

Maybe it was the fact that it was coming from the pack Beta, instead of Jared, or maybe it was simply because Jensen hadn’t felt the presence or reassurance of a mother in so many painful years, but in that moment, sitting in front of Sherry Padalecki, he accepted her words.

“I understand, Ma’am,” he nodded solemnly. He only hesitated for a second before asking, “Do you
think I’m unfit to be your successor?”

It was almost comical the way Sherry’s eyes widened in obvious shock, and at any other time, Jensen might have laughed.

“Jared finally told you?” she beamed, swiping her thumb across his cheekbone before letting go of his face.

He couldn’t help a small smirk. “No, but you just did, Ma’am,” he replied brazenly, his smile growing as she laughed good-naturedly. “I assume Jared hasn’t told me yet because he’s worried I’ll turn tail.”

“More like he’s worried that he’s putting too much on you, honey,” Sherry corrected fondly. “He feels like he’s got no right to expect so much from you. To expect you to give up so much to be with him.” She winked at him, a self-satisfied little grin playing on her lips. “What Alphas don’t realize, is that we Betas are generally three times more perceptive than they are, and definitely quicker on the uptake. And what Padalecki men in general seem to lack, is the ability to hide their intentions when they’re happy or excited about them.”

Jensen laughed, a truer chuckle than he’d given in a while. “Too true, Ma’am.”

“Honey, I want you to listen to me,” Sherry turned serious. “Since the moment I first met you, I realized that you were it for my son. Jared didn’t need to say a single word to me before I saw our pack’s future in those pretty green eyes of yours.” She took one of his hands in both of hers. “As the current Beta, I can sense it when I find someone befitting of my title. I’ve searched for this feeling for a long time, and I was almost afraid I would never find it, or that the Beta my son would choose would just not make that cut, but what I hadn’t realized, was that you just weren’t here yet. Jensen, you’ve shown me something I’ve been wrongly looking for in our wolves; something that no one else has ever had.”

“A bizarre attraction to trouble?” he joked weakly.

The Beta humored him with a small smile. “Undoubtedly,” she nodded slowly, her eyes sparkling with affection, “but also something much more important.” She paused for effect. “You have the heart of a Beta.”

Jensen waited patiently for her to elaborate, sensing that his Alpha’s mother was not finished.

“You know that ache in your heart that you get when you hear about the troubles in our pack?” she asked after a long moment, laying her own palm over her heart for emphasis. Jensen nodded slowly, surprised that he knew exactly the feeling she was talking about, since he’d had it for a long time.

“And,” she continued, smiling slightly, “you know that almighty warmth that seems to just wrap all the way around you when you interact with our pups?”

He nodded quicker this time; he was definitely very familiar with that one.

The Beta’s smile grew and a knowing look entered her eyes. “What about the feeling of protectiveness you get when one of the pack approaches you for help or advice?” she asked, tilting her head. “That fierce, unyielding, I-would-never-let-anything-happen-to-you, kind of feeling?”

Instantly, the artist’s mind was filled with images of Chris and the scare he had about Sophia’s pregnancy; images of Sophia herself seeking him out for help and advice and reassurance when she wasn’t sure who to turn to about Tessa’s unplanned pup; images of Chad and him sitting on the benches outside school and talking about how Chad had the potential to be anything he wanted,
despite what other people seemed to think of him; images of the pups cowering against him when Joe cornered them in the clearing that day.

Yes. He knew that feeling all too well.

At his silent nod, Sherry nodded almost approvingly. “Now, what if I told you that I’d never met anyone else who felt all that, in their heart, as much as I have?” Without waiting for an answer, she cupped his cheek and fixed him with a loving expression. “What if I told you that I sense you feeling it, even more potent than even I do?” Jensen searched for any sign of deception in her eyes, but all he saw there was warmth and pride.

He looked down at his hands in his lap, both reveling in the motherly comfort and simply unsure of how to respond to her apparently unshakeable faith in him. He remembered what it felt like whenever Jody had exhibited the same type of faith in him, and it felt remarkably similar; like he could all but fly if he wanted to.

After a minute, Sherry seemed to realize that he needed to process everything she’d said, and she stood up with a smile.

“Jensen, honey,” she started, “I know my son. And I know that he’s going about this the wrong way, but I also know that it stems from his inability to help you fight these demons. He’s terrified because the man he loves is fighting battles that he can’t fight for him, and it’s that fear of losing you that’s making him act irrationally; like he wants to lock you in a room where no one can harm you the rest of your life.” She shook her head in fond exasperation. “I’ll talk to him, but you need to as well. You’ll feel better when you do, I promise.” She kissed the crown of his head once more before turning to leave.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” he blurted, both mindful of his manners and incredibly grateful for the Beta’s understanding and support. “For everything.”

Sherry responded with another wide smile. “It’s only my pleasure, sweet pea.” The Padalecki Beta hesitated for a moment before adding, “And I’m not trying to tarnish what the title means to you, and bear in mind you don’t have to, but I’d like if – once you feel comfortable enough – that you call me Mom.”

Jensen was glad that Sherry left without waiting for his response, because as he fingered the leather cuff that was now always on his wrist, he found he couldn’t push the words past the monstrous lump in his throat.

~*Jared*~

“Would you stop pacing, Jay-rod? You’re gonna wear a hole in the fucking tiles.”

Jared glared at his best friend, annoyed at his apparent ease with their current situation. “I’m gonna wear a hole in your face, for all the help you’re being, Chad,” he shot back childishly, and the blonde just smirked at him.

Said current situation, was the case of a missing mate. Jared was going crazy, his mind thinking up a whole lot of possibilities that included Jensen incapacitated by his visions in some ditch behind the school football field. It was killing him to be standing idle, waiting in the art room on the chance that Jensen came here for his free period, and Chris seemed to be sharing in his anxiety over their
inaction.

All while Chad, the fucker, seemed content to browse through Jensen’s sketches and paintings.

“How are you so damn calm, Murray?” Chris asked irritably.

Chad waved a dismissive hand in their direction, still flicking through the art portfolio. “I went after Green Eyes when he left Chemistry,” he told them nonchalantly. “He seemed too tired to face y’all so I’d wager he took off for the rest of the day.”

Jared stared at him incredulously. “What the fuck, man?!” he Gibbs-smacked the blonde alpha, perversely satisfied with the yelp of indignation that resulted from it. “You couldn’t tell me this when I had my freak-out about not finding him here?!”

Without waiting for an answer, he stalked to the door, only to be stopped by Chad’s hard voice. “Leave him alone, Jare.”

A flicker of hurt came over him as he turned to face his friend, and Chad immediately softened.

“Look,” he started again, setting Jensen’s portfolio down and looking between Jared and Chris, “I’m just saying that Jensen needs to be alone for a little while. He needs some time to sort through everything going on in his head. You two aren’t helping him with your constant supervision; y’all are just hurting him and making him doubt himself, which is making him upset, as evidenced by his reaction in Chem.” Sighing lightly, Chad clasped a comforting hand over Jared’s shoulder. “I know you’re trying to help, man, but Jensen doesn’t need a bodyguard or a caretaker right now. He just needs his boyfriend and his Alpha. The man that believed in him even before he learned to believe in himself.”

Turning to Chris, he added in the same tone, “And he needs the brother that never made him feel like he was anything but capable.”

“How d’you know?” Jared asked uncertainly, running a hand through his hair.

“I bothered to listen to him.”

The simple answer made the Alpha deflate. Truthfully, he knew he had gone overboard in the two weeks since Jensen’s nightmare and the truth about his visions came out. He was actually sort of surprised, in retrospect, that Jensen lasted as long as he did before blowing up.

Chris seemed to share in that sentiment. “How long, do you think, before he’d be amenable to hearing an apology?”

Chad grinned, returning to his place and opening Jensen’s file once more. “I’d give it a couple hours. And maybe take him some of that pizza he loves so much, from Buddy’s.”

~*Jensen*~

So lost was he in the beauty of the sunset against the backdrop of the town, that Jensen didn’t hear his brother come up behind him until Josh actually spoke.

“You know, your Sasquatch is going crazy and tearing up the whole school looking for you.”
Jensen jerked in surprise, reflexively placing his hand over his racing heart. “Jesus, Josh,” he muttered under his breath as his brother gave a booming chuckle. “Since when do you worry about Jared anyway?”

“Since I’ve grown to find a new appreciation for this mating thing you guys talked about, and also, I’m slightly intimidated by aforementioned Sasquatch,” Josh returned unabashedly.

Jensen let out a grudging laugh as the older Ackles made himself comfortable on the boulder next to him. The brothers sat there in comfortable silence, watching at the sun dropped lazily from sight and the blanket of starry darkness descended upon the sky. It was strangely calming – somewhat therapeutic, even – to have the solid presence of his big brother next to him, not pushing or prodding…just simply being, and protecting.

Protecting him even from his own thoughts and doubts and insecurities and fears, all of which were surprisingly quiet in his brother’s company.

Finally, long after the stars stopped appearing in the sky overhead, Josh bumped his shoulder softly with his own. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Nuh-uh,” he shook his head, keeping his voice as quiet as his brother’s was so as not to disturb the moment. “I think I’m all talked out, today. It’s nice to just relax with you.”

He felt more than saw Josh’s answering nod. “You know, we used to do this when you were a baby.”

This time, he turned to face the older Ackles, a slow smile lighting up his face. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Josh nodded, a nostalgic look entering his eyes. “Me, you, Mom and Dad. We used to put this old blanket down in the back yard and you and I used to lie between Mom and Dad. You were always next to Mom, and I was always next to Dad, and we’d just lie there and watch the sun go down and the night come in…I remember being sure that you understood how important that ritual was,” he chuckled affectionately, “because you were a baby, but you never cried or anything while we were there. We all just…existed. And you? By the time the stars came in, you had always managed to find your way underneath my arm, tucked up against my side,” Josh smiled and put an arm around his shoulders demonstratively. “Mom used to think it was the sweetest thing.”

“We were kids,” Jensen pointed out in a teasing voice, even as he leaned into the warmth of his brother’s side. “Mom used to think everything we did was the sweetest thing.”

Josh laughed, an amused look replacing the sentimental one on his face. “Touché, little brother.”

“I wish I had more memories of them.”

To his credit, the older Ackles didn’t look panicked or saddened by his muted confession. “I know,” he nodded quietly instead. “But all you really gotta remember is that they loved you and me more than anything in the world, and that they were raising us to believe that we could beat anything in the world if we set our minds to it.”

Jensen took the veiled advice for what it was, and dropped his head to Josh’s shoulder in unspoken thanks.

“They would’ve been proud of you, you know?” the older brother added after a minute.

“Yeah?”
“Yeah,” Josh affirmed, nodding, his cheek brushing up a tuft of Jensen’s hair. “You’ve fought against some of the worst things life has to offer, and still came up on top, still smiling that same smile you’ve had since you were a baby.”

Jensen’s lips quirked reflexively in response. After a while, he spoke again. “Hey, Josh?”

“Mm?”

“They would’ve been proud of you, you know?” he parroted back, feeling his brother smile against his hair.

“Yeah?” Josh mimicked his response and Jensen pushed himself back up to meet the elder’s eyes.

He nodded emphatically, hoping Josh could see everything he wanted to say in his eyes. “Yeah. You put our family back together; what was left of it, at least. You never forgot me, even when I forgot you.”

Unshed tears shone in Josh’s eyes as he yanked Jensen forward into a hug without warning, a hand on the nape of his neck keeping Jensen in place. Wordlessly, he wrapped his arms around his big brother, feeling for all the world like that very same baby Josh was remembering from the blanket in their backyard.

~*Jared*~

If I can feel that my ass is numb, doesn’t that in itself mean I’m not numb, since I can feel it? Unless it’s just some weird irony that numbness can be felt…

Jared was jerked from his inane thoughts at the sound of shoes against the linoleum floors. He perked up hopefully; maybe his mate had finally come back…

After Chad’s suggestion of giving Jensen time, the Alpha relented to waiting (im)patiently for his Beta to return to school. He had to come back, since he’d left all his stuff in his locker, so Jared was sitting on the floor in front of said locker, intent on sorting this out with his beloved mate before the day ended.

His shoulders sank in disappointment when he saw Sandy’s swaying lope approaching him.

The beta had a different reaction, smiling tentatively at him as she neared. “Hey, Jared,” she greeted almost shyly. “Waiting for Jensen?”

The Padalecki heir regarded her with caution; Jensen might’ve employed the forgive-and-forget method, but Jared wasn’t so quick to be friendly with the girl who’d left a mark on his beautiful mate.

“Yeah,” he nodded hesitantly, forcing a hard smile on to his face. “I wanted to catch him before he left home.”

“That seems to be the trend today,” Sandy’s smile broadened, seeming comforted by his civil response. “There was the nicest guy outside who was also waiting for Jensen. He asked me where Jensen was, so I told him he could go and check out the club, Lookout, and a few other places.”
Instantly, alarm bells started going crazy in Jared’s mind. He got to his feet quickly, trying to calm his suddenly racing heart. “What guy, Sandy? What did he look like?”

The brunette seemed taken aback by his sudden response, but she responded nonetheless, a crease of concern appearing on her forehead. “Um, tall, kind of lean, with sandy hair…he said he was an old friend of Jensen’s. Why?”

“Did he say his name?” the Alpha demanded, barely repressing the urge to shake the girl when she didn’t answer immediately.

“He sort of mumbled it,” she finally answered, frowning as she tried to recall. “Alan, or something, I think.”

It felt like all the blood drained from Jared’s face at once.

“Adam?” he asked in a barely audible voice, beginning to tremble with a violent mix of fear, fury and protectiveness.

Sandy seemed to realize it was a bad thing, because all she did was nod.

Jared sprinted out the school like a bat out of hell. It was no surprise that the fucker wasn’t waiting out front anymore, but all it served to do was scare the ever-loving fuck out of him.

Desperately, he threw himself into the Impala, dialing Jensen’s number as he did.

*You’ve got Jensen, you know what to…*

He stabbed the ‘end-call’ button violently, before the pre-recorded voicemail could even finish, his heart beating triple time. Rationally, he knew that it was unlikely for Adam to find Jensen before he did, but like all matters of the heart, logic didn’t count for shit.

Before he could try Jensen’s cell again, his phone beeped with a text.

*From: Sandy*

19:02pm

*Try Lookout Peak first. He would’ve liked the spot to be alone.*

Several hundred things struck him as odd about this, but his gut was insistent that it made sense. Jensen wanted to be alone, in a place Jared wouldn’t think to look for him first. Lookout Peak was beautiful and quiet, especially since the club gave people a new place to hang out at.

Without giving himself time to think about it, he threw the Impala into gear and spun the car into an abrupt 180-turn.

*Please, baby…please be there. Please be okay.*

~*Jensen*~
“You know, you’re gonna have to face him sometime.”

Jensen snorted mirthlessly. “I think I prefer when you hated my boyfriend.”

“Liar,” Josh cuffed his head with a fond smile. “And you’re deflecting. It’s almost 7pm, kiddo. Go see your Sasquatch and get your ass home, it’s a school night.”

Waving the directive away with an unconcerned flick of his hand, Jensen stretched languidly, relishing in the cracks of his joints as they moved for the first time in a few hours. He felt calmer, more clear-headed, and now, he actually wanted to see his Alpha. He hated fighting with Jared, and he wanted to end it before the night ended.

“You want a ride somewhere?” Josh interrupted his thoughts, gesturing at his car as Jensen switched his phone back on.

“Nah,” he declined with a smile, “the walk will give me time to think about the talk I’m about to have with Jared.”

Josh grinned in understanding and caught him in a hug, and after a promise to meet up later in the week, his older brother left.

Pocketing his phone, Jensen began to walk, kicking the gravel with the toe of sneaker as he did. He was still caught up in his thoughts, so he nearly jumped out of his skin when a voice suddenly materialized behind him.

“Jensen. It’s been a while.”

No! He thought wildly as he whirled around. No, it can’t be…

###

Chapter End Notes

So, did I make up for my absence? Let me know please, lovelies!

All my love!

-J
Not That Guy Anymore

Chapter Notes

Ok, I'm officially the worst because I haven't replied to comments in two chapters -_-.

I'm so incredibly sorry. My lack of data all the time kills me, but I promise to reply as soon as I can.

Once again, I apologize for the epically long wait. Things were pretty dark for me, for a long time...someone I really looked up to, told me I should "give up and stop being so desperate" with my writing. I was in a bad place with some really dark thoughts...

...but I gotta say that you guys, your support and comments and all your love, was what pulled me back. Made me dare to write again.

It still hurts, and part of me still doubts that my writing has any effect on anyone, but I want to thank you all. From the bottom of my heart. Readers like you guys are the reason I'm still trying. And I promise to try to keep going.

Special thanks to my beautiful readers who have stuck with me for so long - people like frostedgoddess, Gddsgrl, robinmatshe, clindzy, lovefinder, Claire, Acklesholic, halfwit, angels_rvd64 and so many others I wish I could name you all.

Also, a warm welcome to some new readers, Pam, LucyRain, deb167 and Hyalin.

Thank you all so much for being parts of a big reason that this chapter even exists.

Love always <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jensen*~

No, it can’t be…

“Jesus,” he let out a disbelieving huff, a smile breaking out over his face. “Dean!” Without preamble, he threw his arms around the older man in a hug, confused, but no less pleased to see him. “What are you doing here?”

He was met with an amused little smirk. “Just here to check the scenery. God knows I can’t find a woodsy area anywhere else in the world.”

Jensen snorted, punching his old friend lightly in the arm. “Always with the sarcasm. Should I just assume that you’re here to bring me bad news?”

Honestly, at this point, he was only half joking.

“Still such a pessimist,” Dean shook his head mockingly, but his smile was warm and reassuring.
“Why couldn’t I have just come as a social call, while I dropped off your Intel, which has nothing of real note in it?”

“Because,” Jensen rolled his eyes, “my life doesn’t work like that. At this point, I wouldn’t be surprised if I attracted the attention of several serial killers.” His voice sounded baleful, even to his own ears.

Dean cuffed the side of his head, a slight scowl on his face. “Don’t go tempting Fate! Idiot.”

“Moron,” he returned easily, dodging the hand that aimed for him a second time. “So, try telling me that you’re not here because you’re worried about something you found on Mikhail Ozera?”

“I’m not here because I’m worried about something I found on Mikhail Ozera.”

Jensen arched his eyebrow, staring pointedly at the attractive older man until he cracked, which took all of sixteen seconds.

“Ok, fine,” Dean grumbled, sagging slightly. “I’m here because of Ozera. But,” he objected before Jensen could smirk at his victory, “I’m also here because I wanted to see you, kid. It’s been a while, and with all the things you’ve had me on in the past couple months…I’m worried, man. You’ve been getting yourself into some crazy shit.”

Jensen opened his mouth to reply with some snarky comment, but when he saw the genuine concern in his friend’s eyes, he bit his tongue.

“Yeah, well,” he shrugged, allowing a serious note to creep into his voice, “it hasn’t been an easy time.”

Dean’s expressive eyes narrowed in concern. “Why haven’t you been telling me about it, kid?”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Jensen answered honestly. “I figured that I could handle it and I didn’t want to…”

He was interrupted by the unholy screech of a car as it braked violently. Dean moved slightly in front of him instinctively, but Jensen only reacted when he saw the car properly in the muted light.

“Jared?” the incredulous mutter was all he could get out before he was swamped with an almost crippling fear. What had happened? Was everything okay? Was somebody hurt? The pack? Did Morgan make a move?

He was moving forward before he could register what he was doing and his relief was only slightly abated when Jared burst out of the Impala, apparently unharmed.

“Jay…”

He didn’t get anything more out before his Alpha stumbled to him and gripped him close in a desperate hug. Jared was trembling, muttering unintelligibly under his breath and pulling him impossibly closer. Sensing that his lover’s concern was for him, the green-eyed artist was content to allow the Alpha’s ministrations.

He knew he would only get an explanation once Jared was satisfied that he was okay.

It took a few moments, but eventually, the Alpha pulled back. “I thought he got to you,” he muttered, still breathing hard. “I thought he found you.”
“Who, Jay?”

“Adam.”

With that one word, Jensen felt his blood freeze in his veins. Adam was here? Aldis had only warned them just recently…he had banked on the hope that it would take a while before his abusive ex-boyfriend found him, but apparently, Luck decided to screw with him. Again.

He only realized that he had paled when Jared wrapped an arm back around his waist and he caught Dean’s concerned frown. “I’m okay,” the words popped out of his mouth automatically, and he shook his head, trying to clear his muddled thoughts. “I, uh…I’m just surprised, is all.”

“Who the hell’s Adam?” Dean broke in, making Jensen remember that he had never been in the know about his ex. He had fallen out of contact with the Winchesters, at Adam’s insistence, and once he’d gotten back in with them, he hadn’t wanted to bring it up.

He pursed his lips in contemplation. “Give me your gun first,” he ordered with narrowed eyes, holding out his hand palm-up.

The man’s frown only deepened with the request, but he obliged by reaching for the 9mm he had stashed against the small of his back. Jensen took it gingerly, and recalling the basics that Matt had run by him all those years ago, he quickly fieldstripped it.

He took a moment to admire how spotless the man kept his weapon before handing all the parts except the magazine back, missing the look of incredulity and awe on his boyfriend’s face.

“Adam and I used to date a couple years ago,” he answered, grimacing. “He was…of the violent sort.”

“He was abusive,” Jared spat the word out like it was a cuss, glaring at nothing in particular as he began to rub his thumb in circles against Jensen’s hip. “And he’s back around here thinking he’s going to get Jen back.”

Dean actually growled, his eyes darkening, and for the first time, Jensen saw the dangerous man that was feared by so many.

“You wanna tell me why I’m only hearing about this son of a bitch now?” Winchester demanded abruptly, his face taut with fury.

Jensen managed a roll of his eyes. “Because I knew you would react like this. And then Sam’d have to defend you in court. Again.”

“Sam would’ve joined me, then we’d’a made sure it couldn’t be traced back to us,” Dean contradicted him easily. “Winchesters are good at hiding the bodies.”

“Jesus Christ, I hope you mean that metaphorically.”

Jensen’s flippant remark had the desired effect; Dean’s lips quirked instinctively, giving a roguish grin. “Sure, if it’ll make you feel better.”

~*Jared*~
It took several of Jen’s distractions and some intensive interrogation before Dean consented to not
tracking down the miserable bastard. Jared couldn’t say he was pleased, per se, but on the other
hand, with Adam out of Dean’s crossfire, Jared – and more specifically, his Alpha side – would have
free reign to *kill* the fucker if he ever so much as *glanced* at his precious Beta the wrong way.

Dean followed them back to their cabin, because he was also paranoid now, and because Jared
wasn’t about to let his lover out of his sight. He knew he was probably making things worse, since
their fight earlier had been in part about his overprotectiveness, but after the mind-numbing scare
he’d had, he honestly couldn’t fathom being able to spend the entire night away from his Jen.

Once they were safely inside the little cottage, he wrapped his arms around the green-eyed artist,
holding him tight against his chest, as if that would ward off the rest of the world, or at least anyone
who wanted to hurt him.

“It’s okay, Jay,” Jensen mumbled, rubbing circles into the spot between Jared’s shoulder blades
soothingly. “I’m okay.”

Jared basked in the comfort; that unique calm that only Jensen could give him, found his weary heart.
“You’re still mad with me?” he asked in a small voice, a small part of him objecting to how
decidedly *not*-Alpha he sounded.

Jensen pulled back and sighed, and the sound seemed to come from a place deep inside him. “We’ll
talk about it later,” he murmured as Dean stepped inside and began throwing the locks on the door
shut. “Don’t worry,” he added, with a brief caress against Jared’s jaw.

The Alpha heard the unspoken message in his mate’s words; *We’re going to be fine. We’ll figure it
out.*

A relieved smile quirked his lips up, but the smile died in its tracks when Jared saw the grim
expression on Dean’s face. The eldest Winchester had been with Jensen when he had gotten there,
which meant that he had come looking for the green-eyed boy.

Which meant that the trouble didn’t end with Adam’s reappearance.

His suspicions were confirmed when Dean crossed his arms over his chest and told them bluntly,

“I think Ozera is bad news.”

It only took a second before Jared placed the name; Mikhail Ozera, the guy who they thought might
have Shamanic connections, or at least a bizarre understanding of the heritage Jensen’s biological
father had passed on to him.

“What makes you think that?” Jensen asked, his face and tone completely blank even as he linked
Jared’s hand with his own. “What’d you find?”

To his credit, Dean barely reacted to the display of affection. “It’s more what I *didn’t* find,” he
answered tersely. “The guy’s records are bare.”

Confusion assaulted the Alpha. “Isn’t ‘bare’ a good thing?” he asked, feeling a little stupid for not
having the look of comprehension Jensen had.

“Normally,” Jensen nodded absently, not hesitating to explain. “But I’m assuming Dean means that
his records are abnormally scant. I’m guessing birth certificate and nothing else? No driver’s license
or anything?” He looked to Winchester for confirmation, and the man nodded.
“He’s got a small plot of land under his name too,” Dean added, “but that’s it. Either this guy is hiding a shit-load of everything, or his life is as bland as Sammy’s rabbit food.”

A slight grin flickered over Jensen’s lips at that. “Not everyone has a double bacon cheeseburger life, De.”

Winchester smirked briefly, before an agitated look entered his eyes. “Even so, kid. People very rarely have next to no record of their existence, and it usually ain’t a good thing when they do.”

“You’re telling me that you’re suspicious because the guy’s clean?” Jensen bristled.

“No,” Dean returned evenly, “I’m suspicious because you told me something about this guy being some kind of doctor, but he’s got no degree.”

Jensen glared defiantly back at Dean for all of a minute, before he deflated. Instinctively, Jared’s arms went around his mate, supporting him, and it soothed his frazzled Alpha when the Beta leaned back into his chest.

“What are you getting yourself into, kiddo?” Dean asked softly, gentler than Jared had ever seen him. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”

Tense silence fell over them and Jensen and Dean didn’t lose eye-contact for a second of it. Jared didn’t dare to break it, knowing that his Beta was searching for something in Dean’s gaze; for what, the Alpha had no clue, but he knew it was important to the moment.

Long moments that seemed to span over decades passed, before Jensen let out a measured breath and sagged; whatever he had been looking for, apparently found.

“Ozera knew my dad,” he explained in a quiet, level tone. “My biological dad. Ozera was helping him get a handle on these migraines he used to have. Really bad ones, that sometimes caused hallucinations. I think it’s hereditary, because I’ve got them and I don’t know who else to turn to for help.”

Jared squeezed his mate tighter against him, recognizing the half-truth and knowing that it was probably hurting his beautiful lover, who hated lying to the people he cared about.

Dean had stayed calm and cool up until this point, but it appeared the Winchester had reached his capacity.

“Migraines and hallucinations?” he asked incredulously, his voice raising until it was just less than a bellow. “You should be going to the hospital, not trying to track down some nut-job who may or may not have tried to help your dad some 17 years ago! What in the hell are you thinking, Ackles? There could be something seriously wrong!!!”

Jensen flinched slightly and the Alpha shifted to shield him from view, instinctively protective. Dean caught the movement and the glare Jared was sending him, and a flickering of remorse came into his expressive eyes.

Before he could make any move to apologize, Jensen spoke up. “I don’t expect you to understand, or even approve of my approach to this, Dean.” His voice was flat, almost curt, as he stepped around Jared to face the older man defiantly. “But I don’t need you to. It’s my life, my choice; end of story. I’m not a child, and I know the risks I’m taking.”

“Why are you taking risks at all?” Dean shot back in exasperation. “This is your health we’re talking about!”
“It’s my decision!”

“It’s a stupid decision!”

“You have no clue why I do the things I do, Winchester!”

“And whose fault is that?!”

“Enough!” Jared snapped, becoming dizzy from the verbal volleyball. Jensen snapped his mouth shut, throwing him a half-startled, half-annoyed look. “You two are going around in circles!”

Jensen turned back to scowl at his old friend. “I’m not Sam,” he said forcefully, his tone low.

“You don’t have to be,” Dean replied tiredly. “Family don’t end in blood, kid.”

Those words, more than any argument, stopped Jensen cold. Anger drained away from his face, leaving behind the same tiredness that was on Dean’s face. Jared could tell that the fight was over now; both men were faced with the irrefutable knowledge that they were family to one another, and really, wasn’t that what this boiled down to? How stupid people can be, and become, when their family was in danger?

Jensen’s hand found his own and Jared gripped it tight, accepting the unspoken thank you. It seemed his lover was aware of the heights their argument could have reached if Jared hadn’t intercepted.

“He’s my last option,” the green-eyed artist spoke wearily. “Trust me, De. I wouldn’t be taking this chance if I didn’t have to.”

Winchester was silent for an agonizing length of time before he nodded. “I trust you, Jen,” he affirmed gruffly. “But I need you to promise me you’re gonna take every precaution, since I’m assuming you won’t let me come with you.”

“I don’t want him to have any reason to be spooked,” Jensen offered his explanation apologetically. “But I can promise I’ll be careful. Overly so. I swear it.”

Winchester slumped slightly, rubbing his palm over his face in resignation. “Jared.”

The Alpha glanced at the man in bewilderment. “Yeah?”

“You’ll be going with him?” Dean’s hard stare was fixed on him, ignoring the annoyed huff that came from Jensen.

“Yes,” he nodded firmly, switching his hold on Jensen’s hand for an arm around his waist. “I won’t let anything happen to him.”

“Thank the Gods,” Jensen muttered sardonically, rolling his eyes, “because it would be ridiculous to think he could take care of himself.”

“He should know.” Dean’s words were aimed at Jensen, even as he spoke to Jared, “that he doesn’t have to take care of himself anymore.”

Jared’s lips quirked up into a smile when, predictably, Jensen softened.

“Should I expect you two to gang up on me regularly?” he asked, but his voice was gently teasing.

Finally, Dean grinned. “Only when you’re being a stubborn bastard. So, yeah; regularly, I guess.”
“Funny,” Jensen snorted. “Yeah, you’re real cute, D-Dog.”

Dean huffed a laugh. “Touché, kid. First round’s to you.”

~*Jensen*~

Dean was settled in their guest room, Eric had been told that he was spending the night at Chris’ place, a similarly false story had been given to the Padaleckis…

…and Jensen could finally have that talk about overprotectiveness with Jared.

He sat on the end of the bed, legs crossed underneath him Indian style, and his Alpha sat obligingly opposite him, resting against the headboard. Before either of them could get a word out, Jensen’s phone rang loudly.

“Fuck my life,” Jensen groaned without thinking, letting his head fall back in exasperation even as he swiped his thumb aggressively across the screen of his cell. “Jensen Ackles,” he answered curtly.

“Who the hell is Adam and why is it a bad thing that he’s looking for you?!”

Jensen frowned, sitting up straighter. “Josh?”

“Obviously,” his brother confirmed dryly, momentarily distracted. “You know, your phone has this magical thing known to most as ‘caller ID’…”

“I’m distracted,” he deadpanned, “M’with Jared, and I’m wearing nothing but a collar and a cock ring.”

He took perverse satisfaction from Josh’s splutter, and Jared snorted loudly even as his hazel eyes darkened with desire.

“Jesus,” the older Ackles sniffed, “you didn’t have to give me that mental picture…but I’m not getting distracted, Jen! Who the hell is Adam?” he demanded again.

Jensen let out a measured breath through his teeth. How in the world did Josh know that Adam was looking for him?

“He’s no one,” he answered resolutely, after a minute. “Everything is okay.”

“Bullshit,” Josh declared. “Cut the crap and tell me what’s going on, little brother, or I’ll track him down and find out myself.”

“You giving me an ultimatum, Josh?”

Correctly identifying the dangerous edge in Jensen’s voice, his brother sighed lightly. “No ultimatums, Jen,” he denied softly. “Just a promise I once made that I’m trying to keep.”

“Promise?” The green-eyed artist frowned. “What promise?”
“I promised Mom I’d take care of you.” Jensen could hear the warmth, and the smile in his big brother’s voice. “And I promised you that I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you.”

Damn it, how does everyone know my weak spots today? Jensen grumbled inwardly as he raised his eyes heavenward. Maybe I’m getting soft.

Outwardly, he decided to compromise. “I’ll meet you tomorrow and talk to you about it then, okay? Right now, I’m damn exhausted, and I’ve got a few things I need to take care of.”

“Ooh, The Talk.” Josh whistled lowly and Jensen smiled briefly at the mental image he had, of his brother wincing sympathetically. “Good luck, little brother. I’ll see you tomorrow. Take care of yourself.”

“You too, bro.”

Jensen cut the call and promptly turned his phone to vibrate. His talk with Jared couldn’t wait any longer, because frankly, he just hated being in a fight of any form with his Alpha. As he set his phone on his bedside table, he tried to gather his thoughts and the arguments that were running through his head since their fight in Chemistry.

As he was considering this, Sherry Padalecki’s voice rang clear in his head.

He’s terrified because the man he loves is fighting battles that he can’t fight for him, and it’s that fear of losing you that’s making him act irrationally; like he wants to lock you in a room where no one can harm you the rest of your life.

This insight was one of the biggest things that were giving him pause. As much as he wanted to chew Jared out – rant and rave about how his Alpha needed to give him space, because God damn it, he wasn’t some helpless little damsel in distress – he also had to realize that Jared was acting out of two of the most potent emotions in the world:

Love. And fear.

Jensen might have been in a bad place for the past two weeks, since that disastrous trip home and his subsequent nightmares/visions…but Jared had been right there with him. He’d been there, in quiet solidarity, but Jensen had been so caught up in his pain that he hadn’t bothered to realize that his mate had stayed with him, and felt everything he had too, in spirit.

All at once, the still-unofficial Beta felt immensely guilty. He’d snapped at Jared and pushed him away, not seeing the hurt he was causing his amazing Alpha mate, because he was so insistent on handling everything himself. Proving himself, and to who? The pack? Jared? Himself?

Granted, maybe Jared should have discussed it with him before telling Chad and Chris about the nightmares, but then, had he given his boyfriend the chance to do that? Had he given Jared the impression that he was open to talking about that awful night, or had he simply closed himself off and stubbornly refused to address the problem?

He had been an ass. And maybe Jared wasn’t the one that needed to apologize, because maybe Jared wasn’t the one that had caused this little problem.

He turned to look his Alpha in the eye, hoping that every atom of love and guilt and remorse was clear in his emerald orbs.

“Jared, babe…I’m sorry.”
The Alpha’s heart just about leaped from his throat when his mate turned to him, love and pain and regret in his beautiful eyes, and said he was sorry.

Sorry for what? Sorry, he couldn’t handle Jared’s inability to help? Sorry, he couldn’t stand the overprotectiveness? Sorry, he couldn’t deal with the stress of Jared on top of his own worries? Sorry…he couldn’t do this anymore? Couldn’t be with him anymore?

The possibility of the last one nearly made him hyperventilate.

He took a deep breath, ready to let loose with any argument that might prevent the unthinkable from happening, when Jensen stopped him the best way in the world.

Soft lips pressed against his, tentative yet unhurried. He was slow to respond at first, shocked at the turn of events when he had been ready for a verbal lashing, but he quickly got with the program when Jensen’s tongue flicked lightly against his bottom lip.

He growled under his breath, taking control of the kiss by gripping his mate’s hips with almost bruising force and pulling Jensen into his lap. The green-eyed artist straddled him easily, a little gasp escaping his lips as their hardening crotches brushed together.

“Fuck,” Jensen uttered, his voice wrecked. Tightening his grip on Jared’s shoulders, he pulled away, and the Alpha noticed the tension straining his Beta’s body. This more than anything prompted him to refrain from chasing Jen’s lips. “We need to talk Jay,” Jensen muttered, and before Jared could panic, he added, “I gotta apologize.”

The Alpha blinked owlishly. Okay, plot twist. “Why are you apologizing?” he asked in confusion. “To be honest, I thought you were going to tear into me for being such an overprotective ass and confiding in our friends before talking to you.”

“I was going to,” Jensen confessed with a tiny, rueful grin, that Jared immediately returned. “But I guess I really thought about a perspective someone lent me… and I realized that I didn’t really give you much of a choice.” Jared stayed silent as his mate took his hands, bringing their joined fingers to rest on the tops of his thighs. He sensed that his mate needed to get this out, and he wasn’t about to interrupt.

“Jay…I’ve been through most everything in my life, all alone,” Jensen started after a moment of hesitation. “Ever since Jody died, I’ve been all alone. Even surrounded by Aldis, Matt, Dean and the whole gang, I always felt like I had to deal with everything on my own. It was easier that way; I never brought anyone down with me, and there was no one around to witness me fail, so even if I did, no one would think worse of me because they wouldn’t know. But most of all, I was never a burden. I was never the friend people wished they hadn’t made, because I never gave them reason to go to any trouble for me. I handled alone, and that was that.” Tears were beginning to fill stunning emerald eyes, and Jared was too frozen at his mate’s words to think of brushing them away as they began to fall. “And when everything started to happen, the nightmares and the Shaman heritage and the visions…I went back to what I knew. What I always did. Because I didn’t want to lose anyone… I didn’t want to lose Chad because I couldn’t handle my shit. I didn’t want to lose Chris because I kept bringing grief and worry into his life. I didn’t want to lose you, Jay…I couldn’t lose you.” Jensen’s voice cracked as more tears began to fall, bringing Jared out of his reverie.
He pulled his mate into a fierce embrace, tucking Jensen’s head underneath his chin and wrapping one arm around his waist, the other going to run a soothing hand through his dirty blond locks. He made soft, comforting noises, rocking them both gently as Jensen trembled, obviously trying hard to stifle his tears to finish talking.

“I couldn’t allow myself to burden you, Jay,” Jensen finally managed to continue, his voice thick and muffled from where he’d remained with his face buried halfway in Jared’s neck. For the first time, Jared realized how much of Jensen’s abusive past still haunted him; how scarred he had been, and how much he still had to recover from to get over the years of mistreatment and pain. “I didn’t want you to regret loving me; I didn’t want you to regret bringing me into your life, your pack…I didn’t want you to regret that I was your mate. I thought that if I could just show you that I could handle this alone…that I could prove you right. Prove that I was strong enough to be yours, to stand by your side as your mate. I was so focused on dealing with this myself that I never realized how much I was hurting you. You were right there, always there, feeling all the pain I did, without once complaining. You let me sulk and brood and wallow in my own pain without letting on how much I was hurting you by not letting you in.”

Finally, Jensen pulled back, wiping his red-rimmed eyes and gazing regrettfully at Jared. “I got mad at you for telling Chad and Chris because all I thought, was that you weren’t giving me a chance to show you I was stronger than I seemed. I didn’t for a second think about how much you must have needed to talk and share your own worries and concerns…and I can’t apologize enough for how selfish I was, Jay. I just hope you know, and never forget, that I love you, Jared Tristan Padalecki. With every bruised and fractured part of me.”

Jared couldn’t handle the pain in his lover’s eyes anymore. Without preamble, he lifted Jensen off his lap and sat him down comfortably on the bed, before standing up. He didn’t stray far, not wanting to cause any fear in his beautiful mate; instead, he dropped to his knees on the floor in front of Jensen, still holding his hands, placed comfortably in the V between his knees.

“Jen, baby, I want you to listen to me.” The Alpha’s voice was firm and strong, but still with the tenderness and utter adoration that he could never mask from his tone when he was talking to his Beta. “You were never, aren’t, and couldn’t ever be a burden to me. There is nothing in this world, or any other world, that would make me regret loving you, because you are the best thing to ever happen to me. Nothing in my life will ever compare to having you, and I need you to know that. I need you to always remember that you’re my heart and my soul and my entire life.” When tears began to fall from Jensen’s eyes again, Jared exchanged his grip on his mate’s hands, to frame his face instead. Thumbing away the offending moisture, he continued talking. “You’re also the strongest man I have ever met, Jensen. You’re such a fucking badass,” they both laughed slightly at that, “and you’re so cool under pressure. You never let anything phase you or intimidate you. You act like, and you make me feel like, there’s no problem in the world that’s too big for us to handle. There’s nothing that can outsmart you or beat you. Ever since the beginning, you’ve taken all my crap in stride, rolling with the punches and still being there to reassure me at the end of every day. How can you possibly think I would consider it a burden to be half as strong for you, as you always are for me?” He shook his head with a smile. “We’re mates, love. That means we handle things together and we lean on each other when we’re feeling a little overwhelmed. I know you’ve been alone for a long time, love…I know that, and I hate it so much. But you’re not alone anymore, and you never will be again, not if I can help it. And as long as I’m around, I want you to trust that you can lean on me. I promise I won’t think less of you, and I promise I’ll love you just as much as always; I’ll love every single part of you. More than the moon and the stars, right love?”

He grinned, seeing the warm acknowledgement in Jensen’s eyes, of the promise they had made to each other right from the very start.
Jensen nodded shakily, his tears slowly abating. “Forever and always.”

With that familiar vow, Jared knew that they were finally okay again, and so he didn’t hesitate to capture his beautiful Beta’s lips with his, sucking and nibbling and swiping until he was rewarded with a low groan of impatience. Smiling against his mate’s lips, Jared rose slightly, pushing Jensen’s shoulders until he laid back on the bed and then swiftly covering the artist’s body with his own. He braced himself with his forearms on either side of Jensen’s chest, not wanting to crush his gorgeous mate, but Jensen quickly solved that problem when he flipped them over, straddling Jared’s chest.

He chuckled at the dark look that entered Jared’s eyes. “You forget that I’m very flexible, Alpha,” he all but purred, making Jared’s cock pulse with desire. The Padalecki heir could only growl, grabbing his mate’s ass to force Jensen to grind down, their hardening cocks heated even through two layers of denim, making Jensen throw his head back with a moan.

“Yeah, come on, Jen,” Jared growled at the sight, his eyes hooded with need. “You make such pretty sounds for me, baby.” With one big hand, he cupped Jensen through his jeans and squeezed, relishing in the breathless gasp that punched out of his mate. The Beta humped his hand helplessly, soft moans falling from his plush lips.

“Please, Jay,” he pleaded mindlessly, rolling his hips as his hands found Jared’s jeans-covered dick. He palmed Jared’s bulge, making the Alpha growl again. “I want you.”

Without waiting for Jared to respond, Jensen stripped off his over shirt and his t-shirt and wriggled down Jared’s body, far more sensual than he had any right being. The Alpha groaned as his mate leaned down and undid the button of his jeans.

Breathing harshly, Jared looked down when Jensen paused, only to see his mate glancing up at him underneath his lashes, the picture of sexiness. Keeping eye contact, Jensen very deliberately took the zip in his teeth and dragged it down, smirking as Jared cursed loudly.

The Alpha lifted his hips, aiding Jensen as he pulled the jeans down and ripping off his own t-shirt at the same time.

“Fuck, baby…” Jared trailed off when Jensen began mouthing at his cock through his boxers. He threaded his hands through the Beta’s hair, pressing down lightly as Jensen licked him through the thin cloth. “You’re fucking killing me, baby,” he bit off, trying to stop his hips from bucking. “Stop teasing, Jen, come on.”

It seemed his mate was going to take pity on him, because he sat up with a wink. Jared heeded the unspoken directive, practically ripping off his boxers and letting out a strangled groan when Jensen immediately sucked down the head of his cock, as soon as it sprang free from its confines. His mate went slowly, suckling the head and tonguing his slit mercilessly. If Jensen minded the grip Jared had on his hair, he didn’t show it.

After a few torturous moments and a few more pleas from Jared, the Beta sank down his length slowly, hollowing his cheeks and only stopping when Jared’s cock hit the back of his throat.

The Alpha threw his head back at the sensation, bucking slightly when Jensen began to rub the part of his dick that wouldn’t fit in his mouth.

“Fuck, yeah, baby,” Jared growled when he looked down to see Jensen’s lips spread around his length. “Look so fucking sexy on my cock…harder, baby, come on…”

Jared felt like he had died and gone to heaven when Jensen released the grip he had on Jared’s hips,
fondling his balls instead and giving Jared unspoken permission to fuck his mouth.

Wary, still, of hurting his precious mate, Jared didn’t so much slam himself down Jensen’s throat, as he did gently coax himself further into the warm cavern of Jensen’s mouth. He kept one hand lightly, possessively, on the nape of the Beta’s neck as he strained to keep from outright fucking Jensen’s mouth.

When his mate’s tongue suddenly began rubbing up and down the big vein on the underside of his dick, Jared knew he wouldn’t last much longer, and he didn’t want to come without being inside his precious Beta.

Gently tugging the blonde locks, he bit back a whimper as his cock was released from the warm heaven it had been enveloped in. “Want to be inside you, Jen.” He growled at the sight of the drops of pre-come that stuck stubbornly onto Jensen’s lips. That was the last straw for his patience, and before Jensen could blink, he had them flipped back over and he was all but tearing Jensen’s jeans and boxers off.

Straddling the Beta’s hips and grinning darkly at the sound that escaped Jensen’s lips when their cocks brushed against each other, Jared leaned down to lick himself off of his mate’s lips. He gave into the temptation to kiss his lover’s swollen lips, quick and dirty, before he moved on to Jensen’s jaw, kissing a trail down its edge.

Instinctively, Jensen bared his throat, and Jared’s Alpha growled in satisfaction as his Beta submitted. He sucked and nipped, leaving dark marks behind where Jensen couldn’t cover them up. He paid special attention to the hollow at the base of his mate’s neck, laving the skin there before moving onto Jensen’s left nipple. He sucked the tender bud into his mouth, suckling relentlessly and passively allowing Jensen to buck up into him, his cock desperately seeking friction. With his other hand, he alternated between tweaking and rubbing the Beta’s other nipple, before abruptly switching sides and repeating the treatment.

“F**k, Jay, please,” Jensen mewled helplessly. “More… I need more.”

Jared smirked. “Already begging, baby?” he asked huskily. “You hurting for me, Jen? Your hole aching for me to fill you up?”

The Beta sobbed slightly with the force of his desire as he nodded. “Yes, fuck, Jay,” he whimpered. “I need you so badly.”

Jared growled, leaning back and roughly pulling Jensen’s thighs apart. One hand grasped the base of his mate’s cock, staving off his orgasm, and the other rubbed against his hole. “Right here?” he asked roughly, rubbing faster over the furled entrance as Jensen whined prettily. “You want me here?”

“F**k, Alpha, yes…please.”

It was a miracle that Jared managed to keep his mind enough to grab the lube from their bedside table. He wasted no time, lubing up two fingers and plunging them both into Jensen’s ass. The startled yelp that escaped his mate’s lips was a mixture of pleasure and pain, and Jared forced himself to slow down, scissoring his fingers to loosen the still-so-tight channel. He had barely fitted in a third finger before Jensen was begging him for his cock.

“M’ready, Jay,” the Beta insisted, looking so perfectly debauched, his green eyes blown almost black with desire and his breathing harsh and choppy. “Come on, fill me up…need you, please Alpha… want you to take me…want you to knot me.”
And really, that just broke the very last thread of Jared’s control.

Slicking up his cock generously, he pushed into his mate with a growl, bottoming out with one thrust. He stayed still, giving Jensen a moment to get used to him, soothing his lover with nonsensical babble about how tight he was, about how perfect he was, about how good he was for Jared.

About how beautiful he looked, stuffed full of Jared’s cock.

Gradually, Jensen relaxed, and after a long moment, he nodded. “Move, Jay. You can move.” He punctuated his permission with a sensual roll of his hips, and Jared groaned, rocking slowly, still hesitant.

“And maybe Jared meant that more than just the physical way.

Jensen turned his head to kiss the side of Jared’s neck, just underneath his ear. “I’m sure, Jay,” he murmured. “You could never hurt me.”

And maybe Jensen understood, just like he always did.

His desire building up to almost breaking point, Jared began to thrust inside his mate, gentle at first, and then harder as his knot began to grow.

Spurred on by the breathy “Ah, ah, ah,” that fell from his mate’s lips, Jared steadily quickened his pace until he was pounding into Jensen’s prostate with every thrust. The Alpha had enough presence of mind to palm the Beta’s hard length, stripping it in a bid to get his mate to come with him, since he was sure he was close.

“You’re so sexy like this, baby,” Jared groaned, swirling the pre-cum that glistened on Jensen’s dick with his thumb. “Look so good sprawled under me. So beautiful…and mine, all mine, always mine.”

Jensen squeezed his eyes shut, whining lowly. “Please…I need to…Jay…I have to…”

The Alpha grinned; he loved it when Jensen was so drunk with pleasure that he could hardly vocalize what he was so desperate for. “It’s okay, baby,” he almost cooed. “I’ve got you…you can let go, Jen…let go for me, baby…I want you to come for me, I want to see you go over the edge for me.”

When his knot finally slipped through Jensen’s rim, he bit down on Jensen’s shoulder with a muted growl. “Come for me, Beta.”

Jared hadn’t meant for the title to slip, but all it did was push them both over the edge. Jensen arched his back as he came hard and their cries amalgamated into a carnal sound of pure pleasure. Jared rutted desperately against his lover as his come painted his mate’s insides, with no sign of stopping soon.

It took a minute or two for their breathing to return to normal, and it took the last reserves of Jared’s strength to roll them into their normal, spooning position and use their top sheet to clean the spunk off Jensen’s chest and his toned abdomen. When they were finally settled, snuggled close into each other’s bodies, Jensen let out a breathless chuckle.

Smiling at the sound, Jared popped an eye open and gazed at his mate, one eyebrow quirked in question.
Jensen sent him a mischievous grin, wriggling so that Jared’s knot tightened even more inside him, making them both moan.

“We should really fight more often.”

~*Jensen*~

“I’m glad you two aren’t fighting anymore; I swear, Chris was a mess yesterday, and I don’t think he slept a wink last night.”

Jensen grinned at the exasperation and affection in Sophia’s tone. “I’m glad we’re not fighting, too,” he nodded, stopping in front of the Impala where she was – thankfully – parked under the shade of some trees, and leaning against the hood to wait for Jared. Sophia joined him, waiting for Chris. “I hate fighting with any of you guys…although granted,” he added with a salacious wink, “the make-up sex with Jared is fucking amazing.”

That morning, as soon as Jared and he had walked into school, Jensen decided that he was going to come clean. His first priority had been to pull Chris and Chad aside for an apology. When that had gone over almost as emotionally as Jared and his talk had, he had taken the bull by the proverbial horn and ‘fessed up to the rest of the gang.

He hadn’t told them everything, mind; just the part about Adam, because some part of him warned him against revealing his heritage just yet. He trusted the pack, no doubt, but his instincts had led him well enough thus far. It wouldn’t hurt to pay it heed.

Sophia giggled, swatting his arm playfully. “Remember when you used to be all introverted and quiet?” she asked with mock nostalgia. “We’ve created a monster.”

“Well, there goes all my hard work down the drain.”

Jensen’s blood ran cold at the sound of the familiar voice. He turned slowly, but even as disbelief clouded his mind, he knew that he was hearing Adam’s voice.

He looked just the same as he did when they broke up; down to the sandy hair, lean form and downright malicious smirk. The slightest shiver travelled down Jensen’s body and familiar fear settled at the base of his spine. His first instinct, however, was to protect his pack, and he automatically moved to shield Sophia completely from Adam’s view, holding his arm out to keep her behind him.

“Hey, Jenny,” Adam took a casual step closer and Jensen tensed. “Long time.”

For the umpteenth time in his life, the green-eyed artist cursed his bad luck. The parking lot was, of course, empty; Jared and Chad and Tom had football practice, and Chris had a detention for punching a guy who hit on Soph earlier. The rest of the pack – and school – had cleared out when the last bell rang, and Jensen and Sophia had chosen today of all days to wait for their mates in the lot instead of at the football field.

Go fucking figure.

“Sophia, go,” he ordered lowly, but firmly. The beta clutched at his arm as soon as the words left his mouth, and he interrupted her before she could protest. “Now.” His voice, all of a sudden, was
infused with some unfamiliar timbre; he couldn’t identify it, but it made his voice sound different, even to his own ears. More authoritative. Commanding. There was almost a warning layered underneath his instruction. “Go find Jared.”

Although raw power resonated through his voice, Jensen knew that his friend could hear the words he left unspoken; I am not going to be the reason you get hurt.

Though she looked all types of torn, Sophia followed his directive. Jensen had to wonder, briefly, whether it was panic that had turned his voice so imposing, or something else entirely…but that train of thought was quickly derailed by Adam taking another step towards him.

“You’ve been running from me long enough, you stupid whore,” he bit off, all pretenses of niceties gone now that they were alone. His eyes suddenly narrowed, presumably as he caught sight of one of the hickeys Jared had left on him. “Think I didn’t hear about all your little escapades here? Thought you could run from me, spread it for some other dumb fucker and I wouldn’t find out?”

Defiance and anger flared brightly inside Jensen as Gilligan inadvertently insulted Jared. “You don’t fucking own me, Adam,” he snapped, standing his ground. “We’ve been through for years, and you need to damn well accept that.”

In a flash, Adam was in his face, gripping a fistful of Jensen’s shirt towards him. “We ain’t over unless I say we’re over, cupcake,” he sneered, and for a single moment, Jensen was frozen.

Adam hauled off with two punches; one felt like it had split his lip all the way through, thanks to a ring his asshole ex was wearing, and the other was sure as hell going to leave him with a blackened eye.

Dazed by the blows to his head, the green-eyed artist was helpless as Adam slammed him into the hood of the Impala, face-down. One hand gripped painfully at the nape of his neck, holding him there, while the other pinned his right arm up against his back, pushing it until Jensen thought his shoulder would pop out of its joint.

“You’ll never be worth anything more than the dirt underneath my shoes. Do you understand me, you worthless waste of space?” Adam bellowed, right in his ear.

But Jensen didn’t hear a single word of it.

Because right then, pressed against the hood of his Alpha’s car, Jensen felt something pressing into his collar bone, and it only took him a second to identify what it was.

His pendant.

The pendant Jared had given him, on their second date, with the wolf sitting on a crescent moon, howling.

The pendant he never took off since the day he got it.

Suddenly, Jensen was filled with an almost overwhelming clarity.

He was not this guy anymore.

Even when he sometimes acted like an idiot, and reverted back to that abused boy, he still knew that he wasn’t that anymore.

Now, he was a Beta. He was Jared’s Beta. He was part of a family, and he had plans and promises
and a future. He had ideas and friends and love…hell, he had a fucking house with the man of his dreams. He belonged to Jared, and only Jared…

…and Adam was out of fucking line, touching him.

Relying on an instinct he had built up from years of hand-to-hand combat, he snapped his head back, hearing it connect with Adam’s with a satisfying crack. Filled with adrenaline, Jensen followed it up quickly with an elbow to his gut, and while Adam was doubled over, he quickly grabbed the nape of his neck and slammed him into the hood, the same way Adam had done to him.

Holding him tight there and hooking one leg with his own to prevent him from escaping, Jensen leaned down slightly and snarled, “I am not your fucking punching bag anymore, Adam, and I am not under your thumb anymore either. More to the point, I am not yours. I am in love with an amazing man that you couldn’t measure up to in your wildest dreams, and I belong to him. He’s ten times the man you can ever hope to be.”

Shoving him slightly, Jensen straightened, letting Adam slither off the car and on to the gravel, groaning in pain. The Beta clenched his jaw and his fists, narrowing his eyes as he stood straighter; prouder. Steadying his anger, he spoke once more, his voice icy cold.

“I’m happy here. I have family and friends who love me and will back me up. I have Jared. And I’m through running. So you better just turn around, go back to whatever hole you crawled out of, and go. Fuck. Yourself.”

~*Jared*~

Jared, Chad and Tom exchanged grins as they heard their fellow teammates complain about their brutal training session. A definite upside to their DNA was the increased stamina that made them so lethal on the field.

The Alpha’s steps faltered as he realized that his mate wasn’t waiting at the stands, like he normally was after practice. A light frown adorned his face as a pulse of dread thrummed through his body.

Something was off.

“He’s probably just waiting at the car,” Tom offered, when he noticed Jared’s expression. “Or maybe he’s waiting with Chris and Sophia. I saw him talking to her earlier, she was waiting for Kane’s detention to end.”

Jared shook his head, like he was trying to clear cobwebs from his mind. “Something’s not right,” he muttered as he quickened his pace. Before either of his friends could offer him any comfort, Sophia herself came bursting through the doors that led to the field, looking frazzled and terrified.

A small gasp escaped her when her eyes landed on Jared, and the Alpha wasted no time running toward her, Chad and Tom on his heels.

“Sophia, what’s wrong?” he all but snapped. “Where’s Jensen?”

Tears overflowed from her eyes and she struggled to get her words out. “Trouble,” she eventually choked out. “He’s in trouble, that guy cornered us in the parking lot!”
Jared didn’t even need to ask which guy.

Fear and rage exploded within him, a potent mixture of feelings, as he sprinted past her, running as fast as he could and cursing the fact that the lot and the field was on opposite ends of the school property. He knew Chad and Tom were only a few steps behind him, but honestly, he wasn’t sure he would need the backup.

He would only need someone to keep him from killing the bastard if he had laid a single finger on Jared’s Jensen.

Finally, he reached the entrance to the school, his eyes immediately going to the Impala.

The sight of Jensen pressed against the hood, with that asshole pinning him, was enough to bathe his vision in red.

“…never be worth anything more than the dirt underneath my shoes. Do you understand me, you worthless waste of space?”

Fuck that, Jared could always just make sure there wasn’t enough left of the body to be identified.

Before he could take a step and rip the fucker limb from limb, he was shocked into inaction.

In a move that Jared might have missed if he had blinked, Jensen rammed his head into Adam’s, the sound audible even to them. By this time, Chris had somehow joined them, and before any of the wolves could move, Jensen had his ex-boyfriend pinned in the same spot he had been in, just a few seconds before.

Jared listened on with immeasurable pride as Jensen cut his abusive ex down to size, the Beta’s icy tone and the way he kept reiterating that he belonged to Jared, quickly turning the Alpha’s fury and fear into pride and arousal.

“I have Jared,” Jensen finally concluded coldly. “And I’m through running. So you better just turn around, go back to whatever hole you crawled out of, and go. Fuck. Yourself.”

Jared wanted to give his mate a fucking slow clap.

Instead, he forced himself to walk casually to his lover, the rest of the pack following his lead. Jensen finally registered his presence, and a look filled with love, relief and contentedness came over his features.

Before Jared could reach out and pull his beautiful Beta into his arms, Adam had stumbled to his feet, backing away slowly.

“You better watch yourself, Jenny,” Gilligan spat, not taking his eyes off of Jared’s mate. “You belong to m—oomph, fuck!”

Jared and his Alpha decided that Adam didn’t have anything more of note to say, so before he could get the words out of his mouth, Jared tackled him to the ground, using more force than was strictly necessary. In a flash, Jared was straddling Gilligan’s chest, and his forearm was pressing against his windpipe just enough to make breathing uncomfortable. He leaned forward, relishing in the terror that showed on Adam’s face, and the bright bruise blooming on his forehead, courtesy of Jared’s Beta.

“Jensen belongs to me, you stupid son of a bitch,” Jared growled viciously. He felt his eyes shift to amber as his body trembled, his Alpha aching to tear the asshole to shreds. “And I promise you this;
if you ever touch him again, or talk to him again… if you so much as come within 20 feet of Jensen again, I promise that you’ll see your fucking heart before I rip it clean from your chest.”

Gilligan was hyperventilating by now, but this did little to soothe his inner Alpha. Only when a familiar hand grasped his shoulder – he could recognize Jensen’s touch anywhere – did Jared calm slightly, enough for his body to stop quaking with the force to shift and his eyes to change back to hazel.

“C’mon, Jay,” Jensen soothed quietly, his other hand pressing against Jared’s ribs, just over his heart, warm enough to feel like a brand. “I’m okay. And he isn’t even worth the trouble.”

Before he could surrender to his mate’s calming effect, Jared had to make sure. “Do you understand me?” he demanded from Adam with a snarl. “Do I make myself clear!?”

Adam nodded quickly, yelping pathetically, and Jared let him go in disgust. He rose swiftly and brought Jensen into his embrace without taking his eyes off of Gilligan as the worthless coward took off, driving away in a piece of shit Honda.

It was only then that Jared allowed himself to inspect his mate, and when he took note of the bruises adorning his face, all at once, he wished that he had seen them when he had Adam underneath his forearm.

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” he hissed furiously, brushing his fingers over the bruises already starting to color Jensen’s eye.

His mate caught his wrist, shaking his head tiredly. “It’s okay, Jay,” he denied with a small smile. “I did what I needed to do, and that’s more important.”

Pride burst through Jared again, and he carefully kissed the corner of his Beta’s mouth, avoiding the brutal cut Jensen had sustained so as not to cause his pretty mate any more pain.

“I am so fucking proud of you, love,” he murmured. “You were so damn amazing.”

“I guess JR can still be handy, huh, Freckles?” Chris asked, but Jared could sense the tension in the alpha’s voice; Kane had wanted to get his hands on Gilligan as much as Jared did.

When a small, smug smile lit up Jensen’s face, realization hit the Alpha like a freight train and he grinned broadly, amazement taking away the last of his fury.

“What?” Chad asked, noticing their matching expressions first. “What’d we miss?”

Jared brushed his mate’s hair back before answering. “That wasn’t JR.” At their confused looks, he elaborated. “Jen promised not to be JR anymore, and he wasn’t. What just happened, was not JR; it was my mate standing up to something he didn’t have to take anymore. What just happened, was all Jensen.”

~*Jensen*~

“Well, the good times just keep on comin’, don’t they?” Jensen muttered under his breath, stopping in front of his house.
Eric was home early from his trip out of town.

While the knowledge no longer invoked fear in him (much fear, anyway) Jensen knew that he couldn’t face his step-father with his face looking as bruised up as it did. He’d had to endure Jared’s constant checking, had to explain to Dean what had happened at school before all but forcing him to go back home, and had to explain everything to Josh as well.

Suffice to say, he’d had more than his share of protective loved ones for today.

More than that, Eric didn’t know anything about Adam, and Jensen wanted to keep it that way. The man felt guilty enough for being all but absent the past decade, and the green-eyed artist had no desire to dredge up the past and give Eric another reason to wallow in guilt and self-recrimination.

Turning on his heel on a whim, Jensen dug out his phone from his pocket and hit speed-dial 5.

“Jense?”

“Hey dad,” he greeted easily, forcing him tone into something chipper and carefree. “I know you’re not home and all, but I just wanted to give you a heads-up that I’m gonna be crashing at Chris’ again tonight. We’ve got a Chemistry report due and he’s being a girl about me walking back so late.”

Some part of him hated how easy it was to lie to his foster father, but he knew there was no other option.

Eric chuckled. “That’s alright, and don’t make fun of your friend for having something you lack.”

“What’s that?”

“Self-preservation.”

Jensen snorted, wincing when the cut on his lip burned as a reminder of its presence. “Whatever, old man,” he teased. “You’re driving back tomorrow, right?”

“Actually,” there was a small shuffle and Jensen heard a microwave turn on before Eric continued, “I came back earlier than expected, so I’m at home. There might be a job for me tomorrow, though, so I’ll probably head out before you come back from school. I should be back by Monday, though.”

He felt a little bad for it, but a part of Jensen was thankful that their schedules never matched up. Eric having to leave, freed Jensen up for the weekend, meaning he could go see Ozera sooner than he initially expected.

“That’s okay,” he responded, carefully hiding the thrum of excitement in his voice. “Travel safe, yeah?”

He could almost hear Eric’s smile. “Always do, Kid.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before saying goodbye, and it was only when Jensen hung up, a small smile playing on his lips, that he realized he had no idea where to go.

He didn’t want to go back to the cabin – it would feel empty and lonely without his Alpha there – and he couldn’t phone Jared either, because he had told his boyfriend to go home for the night. Doubtlessly, the Padaleckis missed him, and Jensen loathed to be the reason the family never got to see him.

He didn’t want to impose on Chris either; he was sure Sophia would be there, and possibly Tessa as
well, since Sophia’s parents had apparently thrown the girls out, and he didn’t want to crowd his best friend’s home, or worry him.

He could have phoned Josh, but the older Ackles had alluded to having a date that night, and he sure as hell didn’t want to be the one that kept his brother from getting laid.

Wandering aimlessly as he pondered his options, Jensen was revisiting the idea of spending the night alone at the cabin when he suddenly heard someone calling his name.

“Yo, Jen!”

He smiled at the familiar voice, turning to see Chad get out of his car and start jogging towards him, his Volvo left idling on the side of the road. “What are you doing out here, man?” Jensen asked curiously, quickly surveying his surroundings and realizing he was in the middle of town.

Chad huffed and sent him a vaguely reprimanding look. “I could ask you the same thing, Jen,” he retorted without any real heat. “It’s almost ten. You know, it’s not really smart to be wandering around the dark, especially when so many people want your pretty little ass on a pike.”

“Yeah,” Jensen snorted, raising an eyebrow, “The risk is kinda the same of you calling my ass ‘pretty’ and hoping Jared ain’t around to hear you.”

Murray grinned impishly. “Exactly, which translates to pretty fucking dangerous. Seriously, man, why aren’t you safe at home?”

“Didn’t want to explain my black eye and busted lip to my foster father,” the Beta answered honestly. “Your turn. What’s your deal?”

He flicked his thumb in the direction of his car. “I was just going for a drive,” he shrugged, his blue eyes dimming slightly. “Things uh…got a little heated at home.”

Curiosity and concern flared inside Jensen and he wordlessly led his friend back to his car. Switching it off and pointedly stuffing the keys in his pocket, he settled against the hood and waited for Chad to do the same. “You wanna tell me what happened?” he asked after a moment.

Chad huffed a small sigh. “Won’t make much of a difference, Jen. You shouldn’t worry yourself over me, you and Jay have enough shit to deal with.”

“You know,” Jensen said lightly, bumping Chad’s shoulder gently with his own, “a wise man once told me that when people love you, they worry over you.”

The alpha let out a genuine laugh at having his own words thrown back at him, and Jensen was glad to see the smile return to the blonde’s face.

“You sayin’ you love me, Green Eyes?” Chad tutted playfully. “That’s twice we should be glad Jay-rod ain’t around to hear us.”

Jensen sniffed imperiously before breaking his façade and cracking a grin. “Jay knows I love you the same as I love Chris,” he chuckled. “You’re like a brother to me, Chad,” he became serious, hoping the intensity in his eyes could convey his sincerity to the other man. “To Jared, too. And I don’t ever want you to think that we’re too busy with our own crap to lend an ear. You need us, ever? You just come to us, and we’ll put whatever is going on, on hold, because nothing’s more important to us than family. And you’re that, Chad, you’re family. Okay?”

By the time Jensen finished his little speech, Chad’s eyes had softened and the strain on his features
were all but gone.

“Okay, Jense,” he nodded after a beat. “I promise. I’ll come to you guys if I need you.”

The green-eyed artist nodded approvingly. “Even if you don’t need us. Even if you just want to talk. Find one of us, yeah?” At Chad’s nod, Jensen turned slightly to face him. “So how about you tell me what went down tonight, huh?”

“Just a stupid argument,” Chad explained after a minute, scrubbing his face with his palm in a gesture telling of his frustration. “My older brother and my parents, they fight a lot and I usually gotta be the mediator. Kevin’s home for a long weekend and they’re already at it, and I just…” Chad blew a breath through his teeth. “I just couldn’t handle it for a little while.”

Jensen hummed slightly, acknowledging and understanding Chad’s desire to get away from the fighting for a bit. “Back home,” he offered, “I used to sort of mediate between the guys in the gang. They didn’t ever seem to get how exhausting it was for me.”

“Exactly!” Chad huffed, his own annoyance creeping back on to his face with the discovery of having a kindred spirit in Jensen. “I get that Kev’s annoyed about having to come back home so often – he’s never really been fond of the pack life, always wanted to travel and get out on his own – but I just wish they would let one day go without a fight. Just once, I wish they would keep the peace, for my sake, so that I wouldn’t have to pick a side every Goddamn time my big brother comes home to visit.”

Having apparently run out of steam, Chad slumped as he finished his rant, and Jensen instinctively wrapped an arm around him. “Have you tried talking to them?”

“They wouldn’t listen,” the blonde denied tiredly. “They never do. One time, I thought about asking Mrs. Padalecki to talk to them, as the pack Beta, but I didn’t want Jared to find out and worry about it.”

Jensen pulled his friend into a hug, his heart hurting for the emotional guilt and weariness Chad must have endured every time his family fought. “I’m sorry, Chad,” he murmured, heartfelt. “I wish I could help.”

Chad laughed slightly, accepting the embrace. “You are,” he said simply. They hugged for a long moment, Jensen providing the strength that his friend needed as Chad leaned on someone for the first time in years.

The position was hell on Jensen’s bruised body, but all he did was hold on tighter.

###

“If it isn’t Jared’s infamous human Beta. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Jensen.”

Jensen squirmed slightly under Mrs. Murray’s scrutiny, and it was only from sheer force of will that he didn’t hunch in on himself.

After Chad had felt ready to face his family again, he had insisted on Jensen coming home with him. He wasn’t too keen on the green-eyed artist spending the night alone, in the secluded woods, and had threatened to call Jared if Jensen didn’t want to bunk at his place. Not wanting to bother his
Alpha, Jensen agreed…but from the look he was being afforded, courtesy of Chad’s mother, he was almost regretting the decision.

Steeling himself, he straightened his back and offered a hand to the beta. “Pleasure to meet you too, Ma’am,” he smiled charmingly, falling back on the manners Jody had drilled into him. “You have a lovely home.”

“You’re every bit as sweet as Sherry’s been saying,” Mrs. Murray noted, the glint in her eyes not unlike Chad’s. “One has to wonder whether you’re going to be as adept with the pack as she suggests you’ll be. It is such a very bizarre situation; the Alpha heir having a human mate.”

Before Chad could intervene, Jensen smiled pleasantly. “I can only hope to measure up,” he returned easily. “The situation is certainly strange, Ma’am, but I’ve come to love the pack almost as much as I love Jared, so I’ll definitely be doing everything in my power to protect them. And I’d like to believe that my power isn’t as limited as people think.”

Mrs. Murray finally smiled, and the effect was astounding as she instantly looked more welcoming. Chad was grinning broadly, and Jensen felt oddly like he had passed some kind of test.

“Not limited indeed, Jensen,” the beta nodded with another smile. “And please, call me Diane.”

Before Jensen could respond, an older guy traipsed into the living room. He had the same blonde hair as Chad, and while his eyes were also blue, they weren’t nearly as piercing. While they shared physical attributes, the older guy’s scowl differentiated him instantly from the almost-always smiling Chad.

“You must be Kevin,” Jensen addressed Chad’s brother amicably. “I’m…”

“The human Beta,” Kevin scoffed almost disdainfully. It was obvious that the guy held some resentment towards the pack and their perceived role in keeping him from branching out. “I’ve heard.”

“Kevin,” Diane Murray snapped at her eldest son, “where are your manners?”

The older Murray snorted mirthlessly. “Mother Luna forbid I show the pack-worshipping human that we’re not all impressed by the fact that he’s sleeping with the Alpha heir.”

Chad bristled slightly next to him, inching in front of him protectively. “Lay off, Kev.”

Like a switch was flicked, Kevin rounded on his younger brother. “Scared the Alpha’s little human is gonna tattle on me, little brother?” he taunted. “Or are you just so scared that you won’t mean anything outside of that precious pack? Are you that desperate for someone’s approval that you’ll…”

“That is enough.”

Jensen’s temper was usually slow to spark, but not in this instance. That same deep thrum that had entered his voice earlier, when he ordered Sophia to run, was resonating in his voice now. That commanding tenor that reverberated in his tone seemed to have the same effect on the Murrays, as all three of them focused on him. He barely noticed Chad’s surprised look, in the wake of his protective anger.

He narrowed his eyes at Kevin. “Whatever problem you have with me, whatever problem you have with the pack, you take it up with me. You do not get to take that out on Chad,” he stated, his voice sounding different even to his own ears. More forceful, somehow, and more powerful. “Your brother stretches himself to breaking point trying to keep the peace so that y’all don’t tear the whole family
apart, and this is how you thank him? By mocking him? By trivializing his sense of loyalty?” Jensen’s voice steadily turned colder. “You should be thankful for having someone as loyal and steadfast as your brother. And if you stopped feeling so damn sorry for yourself, you might even realize that you’re pushing away the only person who’s always been on your God damned side! And for what? A temper tantrum because you don’t like the fact that you have a couple obligations to your family?”

Jensen shook his head and fought to regain some semblance of calm. When he felt like he could talk without his voice shaking, he continued, in a slightly more even tone. “Take it from someone who had practically no family until your brother and your pack came along; a few obligations are nothing if it means you never have to feel the gut-wrenching pain of being completely alone in the world.”

Kevin looked shell-shocked by the end of his rant, and Jensen liked to think there was some remorse in his blue eyes.

“You think about that,” he finished roughly. “You think about that the next time you fight to get away from the people who would lay their lives down for you in a heartbeat, and you think about that the next time you take your anger out on the only person in the world who’ll stand by you even when you don’t deserve it. Because that’s what pack is about, and that’s what family is about, and it seems to me like Chad’s the only one who really gets that.” Turning to Diane, Jensen spoke courteously, but with no guilt or regret. “Mrs. Murray, I know I have no right to come in here and talk about things I ought not be talking about, but you should know that Chad’s been nothing but a brother to me, and all I’m hoping to do here is remind y’all to appreciate what a stand-up guy he is. He doesn’t deserve to be the punching bag in the middle, and not only because of what a treasured pack member he is.”

Jensen took a step back, not daring to look at Chad. Drained of his earlier ire, he wasn’t sure anymore, that his friend would appreciate Jensen sticking up for him.

“I’m sorry if I’ve overstepped,” he added civilly, “and I’ll take my leave now.”

He had barely turned around before Diane’s voice stopped him. “Jensen, hold on.” He met her eyes without hesitation, and he hoped his shock didn’t show when he saw tears there. “You’ve not overstepped,” the beta said steadily. “Not in the least. Actually, I’d go so far as to say that you’ve alerted me to something I should have seen myself, ages ago.” Turning to Chad, she addressed her youngest son. “I’m so sorry that we’ve always put you in the middle, honey. I’m so sorry, I never even realized…”

“It’s okay, mom,” Chad was quick to comfort his mother, as Jensen knew he would be. “It’s alright. You didn’t know.”

Sensing that mother and son needed a moment alone, Jensen slipped stealthily out of the living room and out of the door, closing it softly behind him and settling down on one of the porch chairs. When the front door opened again, the green-eyed artist was surprised to see that Kevin had been the one to follow him out.

He tensed automatically, expecting the worst, but the older Murray didn’t even notice, taking a seat on the chair next to him and fixing his gaze on his shoes. “What were your dreams before the pack came into your life, Beta?”

Jensen started slightly at the question; who would have thought that the guy would want to have a heart to heart with him after he chewed him out? Shaking off his shock, he refocused on Kevin, who’s eyes had traveled up to meet his now. There was regret in the eyes that was both like, and unlike Chad’s. Pain and weariness. The thirst for understanding.
“You don’t have to call me Beta,” he murmured first, relaxing. “I’m just Jensen. I’m not the Beta.”  
Not yet, at least…not officially.

Kevin smiled slightly at that, as if he knew an inside joke. “Okay, Jensen. What were your dreams before you met Padalecki and got dragged into our world?”

“I was gonna get into a top art college,” Jensen answered with a grin. “Open up my own gallery eventually, someday, rub elbows with some of the big names, you know?” At Kevin’s smile and nod, he added, “Why?”

“I have big dreams, Jensen,” he shrugged, looking out at the yard as though seeing something else entirely. “I want to see the world and live my life in the moment. I never wanted to be tied down to this town. But I am.”

Jensen was already shaking his head. “You’ve gotta stop thinking of it as a choice,” he stated baldly. “This is your family; they’d never ask you to pick between them and your dreams. They’re just asking you to come back home when all is said and done. I mean,” he laughed slightly, “I’m still going to go to an art college and open up a gallery and rub elbows with the greats. I’m just gonna have a home to come back to when I’m done. You can travel the world and live the adventure you’re dreaming about; you just have to touch base every once in a while. Embrace your roots instead of trying so hard to forget them.”

“Think it’ll be that easy to balance?” Kevin asked doubtfully, insecurity taut on his features as he finally vocalized his fear.

“Nope,” Jensen denied sunnily, before sending the older Murray a gentle smile. “But I think it’ll be worth it.”

Nodding slowly, Kevin stood up, going to lean against the banister across from Jensen. “I don’t ever mean to insult or hurt my brother,” he added, vaguely defensively. “I just hate that he wants to be stuck in this town. There’s so much more for him out there…I want so much more for him.”

“Ain’t about what you want,” Jensen shrugged. “It’s about what Chad wants. And he’s gonna make his mark on the world, whether he’s here or in Canada or in France or in Rio, don’t doubt that. Maybe it’s time you have some faith in your little brother, and support him as much as he’s always supported you?”

Kevin nodded slowly, running a hand through his blonde spikes. “I’ve been a pretty shitty big brother.”

“Yup,” Jensen agreed easily, smirking when Kevin huffed. “But he’ll forgive you. Chad’s pretty fucking great like that.”

The older Murray barked out a laugh, eyes sparkling, and for once, Jensen caught a glimpse of the big brother that Chad must have known. Kevin offered him a mock salute before heading back to the door, presumably to apologize to his brother.

“You’re gonna be a great Beta,” he offered just before he went in, his hands poised above the doorknob. “Take it from someone whose family you’ve stopped from possibly fracturing.”

With a wink, the older boy headed inside, leaving Jensen feeling a little better about his ability to stand at Jared’s side as Beta.

After debating with himself for a few minutes, Jensen finally decided to leave; Chad needed some time with his family to sort through everything, and he was only intruding on them. More to the
point, he wasn’t sure that Chad would be too pleased with him for sticking his nose in his family affairs; in all likelihood, the blonde was pissed to hell at him, and he didn’t want Chad to have to deal with him in the rush.

Their cabin was only a couple miles away, and Jensen carried the key Jared gave him at all times. He’d miss Jared, and his warm and loving presence, but still.

One night alone wouldn’t hurt him.

~*Jared*~

“Jared, honey, are you missing Jensen that much?”

Sherry Padalecki’s amused voice came from behind Jared, and the Alpha turned around to grin at his mother, his hands full of soapy suds and his t-shirt half soaked through.

Yes. The future Padalecki Alpha and the school’s star linebacker had resorted to washing dishes because he was missing his mate so damn much.

Even so. He wasn’t about to admit defeat to his momma that easily.

“Nuh-uh,” he frowned, hiding his smile. “Can’t I just offer to help my awesome mother after she spent the whole afternoon making us such a great meal?”

Sherry raised an eyebrow at her son, eyes sparkling with mirth. “Jared, honey, we bought pizza today.”

_Huh. Didn’t really even taste it._

“I knew that,” he tried to recover, failing miserably when he grinned impishly at the current Beta. “Am I that obvious?”

Sherry grabbed the dish her son was unconsciously waving around, saving it from its fated destruction. “Only a little, honey,” she chuckled, taking over and efficiently soaping up the plate. “Why don’t you just go visit him? It’s not even ten yet.”

Jared sighed theatrically. “Jensen says I don’t spend enough time with you guys,” he pouted. “He says he’s not gonna let there be reason for y’all to hate him for stealing me away.”

“Honey, we’re thankful to him for that.”

“That’s what I tried to…hey!” Jared glared at his mother indignantly when he realized what she was implying, and she laughed freely.

Finishing up the last dish, she drained the water, wiped her hands and turned to face her sulking son. “We love you, Jare, and we love Jensen, and more than that, we’re going to enjoy having Jensen become part of the family too. We can accept that y’all need to be together, especially given everything that you two have been through. We’re not going to take it personally.”

“I know that,” Jared grumbled, “but he won’t listen to me.”

“So convince him,” Sherry shrugged easily. “And while you’re at it,” she added, a look of utter
exasperation on her face, “why don’t you talk to him about the Beta issue too?”

“Momma…”

Sherry held up a hand to interrupt the excuse she knew was coming. “He’s a lot stronger than you think, Jare,” she stated, sounding awfully like she knew something he didn’t. “Just try him.”

Before he could think on his mother’s words and her strange tone, she was gone. Jared was too tired to look into it, so rather than badger her, he simply pulled out his phone and dialed his mate.

You’ve got Jensen, you know what to do.

Jared sighed, figuring his mate had taken a painkiller and turned in early for the evening. He had been a little more bruised up from the confrontation than Jared had initially thought.

Overcome with boredom, Jared settled in his room, flicking through the channels on his TV and trying not to acknowledge how cold and empty his old bedroom felt, as compared to the room he shared with his Beta at the cottage.

It was a little after eleven when the Alpha’s phone rang with the obnoxious ringtone Chad had personalized for himself.

“It is way too late for this, man,” he answered moodily, his attention still half on the re-run of Psych that was on the screen.

“I can’t find Jensen.”

Jared bolted upright, swinging his legs over the bed and clutching his phone in a death grip. “This better not be some kind of a stupid fucking joke, Chad,” he warned, his heart rate picking up double time. “I swear to God…”

“No joke,” the alpha interrupted him grimly, and the tension in his tone was too real for Jared to ignore. “I picked him up about an hour ago…it’s a long story, but to sum it up, he came home with me because he didn’t want to worry you, and then he went all badass and mediated the shit out of a stupid fight Kevin was having with everyone, and then I had to talk to my mom, and I thought he was just outside, that’s what Kev told us, but then I went outside, and he wasn’t there, and I called Chris, but he said he hasn’t seen him, and from your tone, you haven’t seen him either, and fucking hell, I should’ve checked on him, I know I should’ve, and now I can’t find him, and…”

“Breathe, Chad!” Jared snapped out the command, hearing his best friend gulp in a desperate lungful of air. The alpha had the tendency to babble and get everything out in a single breath when he was panicked or stressed, and the last thing Jared needed was an unconscious alpha when he was the last to see Jensen. “Okay, if he didn’t go to Chris’, have you checked with Joshua? Or checked the cottage?”

There was a slight pause and Jared could almost see the sheepish expression that was probably on Chad’s face. “Um…not exactly. I panicked when I realized he wasn’t at your place or Kane’s.”

Jared rolled his eyes, trying to calm his racing heart. There was no reason to believe anything bad had happened. Grabbing his keys, he shoved his feet into his sneakers, not bothering to tie them or change out of his sweatpants and wife-beater.

“You phone his brother and I’ll check the cottage,” he asserted, making his way silently down the stairs. The house was quiet, so instead of waking his parents, he scribbled a quick note and left it on the breakfast island in the kitchen. “Phone me back once you’ve spoken to Josh.”
Chad hung up without another word, but the Alpha didn’t take offense. On the contrary, he was pleased that his best friend was so serious about his Beta’s safety. When Chad phoned back to report that the elder Ackles knew nothing about his brother’s whereabouts, Jared had to force himself to remain calm, for Chad’s sake, if not his own.

Even though his gut wasn’t warning him of any danger – and he’d come to rely on his mating instincts quite a lot – Jared still pushed the Impala to her limit, getting to the cabin in half the time it normally took him. Their little place was in darkness, but glancing at the time, Jared reasoned that his mate could just be curled up in their bed, fast asleep. It was, after all, closing in on midnight, and his beloved Beta had had one hell of a day.

Letting himself in quietly, he took the stairs two at a time to their bedroom.

And his heart skipped a beat.

For once, luck seemed to be on their side, as Jensen was there, as predicted, fast asleep and snuggled up with Jared’s pillow. His nose was nuzzled into the soft material, as if Jared’s lingering scent had eventually lulled him into sleep, and he looked so peaceful and perfect that Jared’s chest warmed with an almost uncomfortable heat.

All at once, an abundance of feelings crashed down over Jared; fierce love and protectiveness and possessiveness, along with the stark realization of just how much Jensen meant to him. And though the Alpha knew it to be a fact, he could, in that moment, feel the truth of how meaningless his existence would be without his Jensen.

He didn’t think he could ever express his gratitude for his stunning, precious mate.

Shooting off a quick text to Chad, Jared wasted no time in toeing off his sneakers and crawling into bed next to the love of his life, replacing the pillow with his body and gently manhandling Jensen until his head rested against Jared’s heart, mindful of the bruises on his lover’s face. Their legs were wrapped together, Jared’s arms wound around the Beta’s waist and Jensen’s arms resting lightly against his chest.

Jensen nestled closer unconsciously, a sleep-softened smile gracing his already gorgeous features.

“Sleep, love,” Jared soothed, his voice barely more than a soft croon. “I’m here now, I’ve got you… sweet dreams, my Beta. I love you more than anything in this world.”

To Jared’s great surprise, Jensen was awake enough to murmur back, “I love you too, Jay, just as much.”

Jared laughed lightly, kissing his mate chastely before bringing him even closer. They could talk about the night’s escapades tomorrow, but for tonight?

Jared was more than happy to just be.

###

Chapter End Notes
Hope y'all enjoyed this chapter; I know a lot of you waited for the action with Jensen and Adam, and I have a nagging feeling like I forgot to shout-out someone who called the confrontation between Jen and Adam...

If I did forget, my deepest and humblest apologies. Please tell me, and I will immediately fix the problem.

Anyway, thanks again to all you guys who are sticking with me and keeping the dark and the hurts at bay.

Lots of love!

JayGirl <3 <3 <3
He woke up to indescribable warmth.

Eyes flickering open, Jensen realized he was snuggled into a muscled chest, and a deep breath allowed him to recognize Jared’s unique scent before he panicked.

*You were supposed to be spending time with your family, babe.*

Even as the admonishment ran through his head, Jensen couldn’t help but to smile softly. His Alpha’s presence was a damn sight better than his pillow, at least. Shifting in the arms that held him close, the green-eyed artist wrestled his hand out from underneath Jared’s arm and groped for his cellphone on the bedside, trying not to wake his sleeping boyfriend.

01:42am.

Muffling a groan against his lover’s chest, Jensen let his phone fall back on to the bedside with an unceremonious clatter. Once again, he had slept for a little under three hours; it was like his body was conditioned to wake up before one of his nightmares/visions came along, leaving him exhausted and yet woefully unable to drop off into blessed unconsciousness.

Jared stirred and guilt swamped the almost-Beta. *No need for both of us to be up*, he reasoned to himself as he painstakingly slipped out from the Alpha’s hold with minimal disruption. Covering his lover back up, he crept out of the room on the balls of his feet, silent as the night.

As Jensen shivered lightly, he cursed his lack of foresight for not bringing a jacket with him. Quietly descending the stairs, he felt his way to the sofa in the dark, grabbing the afghan that was draped on its back. Feeling confident in his memory of his surroundings, he maneuvered himself to the back
door without switching on the lights, and it was worth it when he opened the door and the soft, blue moonlight streamed in.

Breathing in the crisp air, he stepped outside, relishing in the feeling of cold, dewy grass against his bare feet. Without thinking about it, his feet took him to the Impala, and he got up on the trunk of the car, leaning against the back windshield.

Settling into the place and allowing a foreign calm to descend upon him, Jensen lifted his face to catch the night breeze. His eyes slipped shut as it caressed his cheeks, not very strong, but strong enough to make him shiver. Though his nerves were frazzled – thanks in no small part to how little sleep he was getting – Jensen found some semblance of peace in the nighttime air; it was still and open, something he hadn’t even realized he had needed until just then.

All of a sudden, he could appreciate how amazing it must be to have a wolf form.

To be wild and free. To have an escape that allowed total release from the tension and concerns of human life. To forget everything but the feel of the damp grass and the thrashing rumble of paws meeting it.

Who wouldn’t want that?
“You know how I told you he went all badass on Kevin and Mom and mediated the shit out of their fight?” Chad paused until Jared made a noise of affirmation. “Yeah, well, he had that Beta thrum in his voice, almost as strong as your Alpha voice.”

Jared’s breath caught in his chest. “Are you sure?” he asked in a hushed voice, as though the topic was too delicate to discuss in normal tones.

He could hear his friend’s eye-roll in his exasperated voice. “We all almost presented our throats, Jay-Pad,” he stated bluntly.

“Fuck…” Jared breathed, a thousand indescribable emotions flooding him. “Does he know?”

“Not a clue,” Chad replied cheerfully, “far as I could tell.” The blond alpha waited a beat, before adding solemnly, “It’s time you stopped using your own insecurities about this as excuses, man. Jensen deserves to know, it’s his future. Maybe you need to start trusting your mate as much as he trusts you.”

Damn, but when Chad chose to be serious, he made some seriously insightful observations.

“I know,” the Padalecki Alpha found himself muttering in resignation. “I think he’s awake…I’m going to tell him now,” Jared told his friend decisively. “No more hiding.”

Without waiting for an answer, the Alpha hung up, knowing his friend would understand. Dropping his phone back on the bedside table, he stood up, his body sore from the lack of sleep. All at once, he felt a rush of concern and empathy, thinking how sore his beautiful mate must be.

Is this the time he’s been getting up for three weeks? The Alpha wondered worriedly. Making a mental note to try harder at getting his mate to get more rest, Jared made his way downstairs, following the intoxicating scent of his lover.

He found Jensen reclined against the back window of the Impala, wrapped in an afghan and his own thoughts. The sight of the moonlight splashing on to the beautiful features of the man he loved, was a breathtaking one. Jensen looked almost unreal; like a small piece of paradise that was all Jared’s to enjoy.

“I’m not asleep, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Jensen’s muted, clear voice suddenly cut through the absolutely still air, without the artist’s eyes opening.

Jared grinned, seeing the smirk his mate was sporting. “How do you always do that?” he asked laughingly, hoisting himself up next to Jensen and gathering the stunning man into his arms. “I thought super senses was exclusively a wolf thing.”

“You wolves think everything is exclusive to you,” Jensen teased playfully, finally opening his eyes. His vibrant verdant eyes sparkled with mischief and love, despite the exhaustion that Jared could clearly read there.

“That’s because you humans have always been so underwhelming,” Jared teased back, responding to the jibe with a smile, happy to see some semblance of peace on his mate’s face. In that moment, the Alpha felt like they could figure anything out; like they would figure everything out.

Jensen’s laughter was like music to the Alpha’s ears. “Why are you awake?” the green-eyed artist asked, snuggling back into Jared and throwing the afghan over to cover both of them. “You were out cold when I left,” he added around a jaw-cracking yawn.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” Jared chided, instead of answering the question. The affectionate kiss
he pressed into Jensen’s hair belied his admonishments. “I could have kept you company.”

“There was no need for both of us to lose sleep,” Jensen shrugged, yawning again, muffling it against Jared’s chest. “I know you mean well, but I function better than you with little sleep.”

Jared huffed. “Not the point, love.”

“What was?”

“Um…” Jared thought for a moment, before pouting. “I can’t remember.”

Jensen laughed again. “So tell me Jay,” he murmured sleepily, a smile still playing on his lips, “what’s got you awake?”

Jared steeled his nerves. This was it. This was the moment. He had to tell Jensen, and he had to tell him now, or risk his lover finding out from someone else… and Jared had learnt his lesson from the time when Jensen had found out about him being a Were. Taking a deep breath, the Alpha willed his voice to remain steady.

“Jensen, baby…” he faltered slightly, before foraging on doggedly. “I need to tell you something.”

“Anything, Jay,” came the immediate reply.

Jared decided that ripping the proverbial Band Aid off was the best way to go. “Jen, you’re my Beta, which means more than you just being a beta…it means you’re also the Pack Beta. You’ll rule the Padalecki Pack with me, and all the wolves will look up to you and follow you as their Beta.”

His beautiful mate barely stirred in his arms. “Yeah, I know. What’d you want to tell me?”

Jared gaped at his lover, flabbergasted. “You...” he asked weakly.

Seeming to notice his Alpha’s response, Jensen sat up, twisting his body to look at the Padalecki heir. A puzzled frown played on the Beta’s features, before comprehension dawned. “I know,” he repeated simply. “I mean, if I’m your mate, and you’re the Alpha…I kind of figured it out,” Jensen grinned in amusement.

Jared huffed in disbelief. He had agonized over this revelation for ages…and Jensen had already figured it out, dealt with it, and…stayed, apparently.

Smiling broadly, Jared caught his mate’s lips in a brief, but passionate kiss. “I want to be indignant, but I’m too relieved.”

“You still should have been the one to tell me, Jay,” Jensen maintained around a small laugh. “I even spoke to your mom about it, before you mentioned it.”

Jared suddenly remembered the suspicious look on his mother’s face when she had been encouraging him to talk to Jensen.

Well. At least that makes sense now.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized with a sheepish smile. “I wanted to tell you,” he added, caressing his lover’s cheek, “but you’ve already given up so much to be with me…”

“How could you say that, Jay?” Jensen asked quietly, pressing a kiss into his collar bone before sending him a sweet smile. “You’re my family. The pack is my family. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for y’all.”
Jared shook his head, apprehension clouding his blue-green eyes. “You might think differently if the Pack asks what I’m afraid they will ask of you…”

The power couple locked intense gazes, both of them forgetting the gorgeous night surrounding them in favor of the intensity of the moment. Jared felt like his mate was seeing straight through to his soul…

…and he was.

“You aren’t ready to tell me yet,” Jensen murmured astutely. A reassuring smile quirked his lips up. “That’s okay, Jay. It’s enough knowing that you aren’t deliberately hiding things from me. Now that I know that, I can wait until you feel comfortable enough to ask me.”

A wave of relief and love for his mate crashed over Jared, making him weak-kneed. “I love you so fucking much, you know that?” Jensen grinned in response, winking cheekily at him.

“Every day, it’s implied.”

~*Jensen*~

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so so sorry!”

Jensen froze, the beaker of silver nitrate in his hand precariously close to the murky green concoction that was bubbling over the Bunsen burner. He gaped at a tearful Sandy McCoy, unsure how to react to the unfamiliar sight. When her breath hitched and a tear fell down her cheek, Jensen snapped out of his inaction, putting the volatile solutions down, and far away from each other, before turning to her.

“Um…” he hesitated, pulling off his goggles and gloves and reaching a consolatory hand towards her. He nearly choked on his own breath when the petite beta threw herself at him, winding her arms around his stomach and sobbing into his shirt. He patted her head awkwardly, fighting against a panic that he never even had when he faced off against Adam. “Are you…I mean…is everything…I just…I don’t really understand what’s going on right now.”

At his plaintive statement, Sandy huffed the smallest of laughs, pulling back and mopping at her face. “I-I’m sorry,” she hiccupped again. “I didn’t mean to tell Adam where you were. I didn’t know he was your ex, I didn’t know he wanted to hurt you! I swear it on Mother Luna! I know you have no reason to believe me, after everything I’ve done and all the times I’ve tried to hurt you, but I’ve changed, honestly…”

“Fuck my life!” Jensen yelped, flabbergasted as an epiphany rolled over him. “You’re my brother’s mate!”

At Sandy’s suddenly pale face and shocked silence, Jensen knew his deduction was right on the money.

Suddenly, there were a lot of things that made a hell of a lot more sense; that day he had overheard Sandy talking to Mr. Beaver about the humanization process. How Josh knew where the cottage was. How Sandy and Josh both suddenly respected the mating bond and sought out his forgiveness. How his brother always seemed too well-informed about where he was and the things that were going on in his life, like his blow-up in Chemistry and Jared looking for him, and Adam…
“I understand if you hate me, and want me to stay away from your brother. You’d be entitled, I know, and you have every right to tell Josh exactly how awful I was to you…”

“Whoa.” Jensen held up his hands palm up, confusion marring his features. “What are you talking about? I’m not going to tell Josh what happened between us.”

Now, it was McCoy’s turn to look baffled. “You aren’t?” she asked uncomprehendingly. “But… why not? I was miserable to you.”

“I know,” Jensen nodded with a small smile. “But I would never dream of standing between a mating bond, especially not my own brother’s. I want him to be happy.”

“Even if it’s with me?”

Her muted question made Jensen sigh. Truthfully, he had more or less forgiven the girl when she had apologized; the only reason his suspicions remained, was because he sensed that she was hiding something. Knowing that this was the big secret was, actually, a relief.

He patted her shoulder awkwardly. “As long as you make him happy, we shouldn’t have a problem.”

Again, he found himself with an armful of sobbing Sandy. Part of him wanted to shrink away, but his Beta instincts (Jensen was mildly intrigued to notice) were stronger, and it urged him to comfort the girl. Relying on the instinct, he hugged her slightly, still rubbing the space between her shoulder blades in comfort.

“It’s okay,” he found himself saying. “It’s water under the bridge. I’m actually glad you know what a mating feels like now; and understand that Jared never wanted to hurt you when he broke up with you.”

Sandy pulled back, more composed now. “I understand,” she nodded softly, wiping her face. “I’d do anything for Josh.”

“You were the date he was on the other night, weren’t you?” Jensen guessed with a grin. “He seemed stoked about it, so it looks like my brother’s feeling the bond too.”

Sandy smiled and blushed, and it was a side to her that Jensen had never seen before. Slowly, his reservations fell away, and he began to see the girl, instead of the vindictive harpy he’d been watching out for. Honestly, he was glad that she’d found her mate – it was weird that it was his brother, but he meant it when he said that he wanted Josh to be happy. And the JR part of him couldn’t help but admit that it was a great way to ensure Sandy’s loyalty to the pack, which was a necessity on account of the looming threat of pack war.

“I get it, now.”

Jensen blinked in confusion at Sandy’s declaration and mysterious smile. “Get what? Mating?”

“That,” Sandy’s smile widened, “and also, why you’re his Beta. And why I could never be.” Jensen raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to elaborate. “I thought I could be,” she continued with a shrug, “if not Jared’s mate, then at least Beta material…but you’ve always been more suited to it than me, even as a human. I could never care for so many people the way you do; find a way to relate to every member of the pack in one way or another. But you…you seem so comfortable in the role, as if you were priming for it your whole life! You respect our lifestyle more than some wolves, and you’ve embraced us all as family. That’s something incredible,” she finished with a watery smile. “That’s something that sets you apart from all of us.”
“Almost everything sets me apart from all of you,” Jensen replied balefully, running a hand through his hair.

Sandy aimed a curious look at him. “Why do you think that’s a bad thing?”

“You think it’s a good thing?”

“Yes,” Sandy nodded readily, ignoring his disbelieving tone. “Even when I was so jealous of you that I could barely think straight, I still knew that you were the best thing to happen to the Padalecki Pack since the Pack Treaty.”

Jensen briefly thought back to a conversation he’d had with Jared, early on in their relationship, when the Alpha had mentioned the Treaty that was negotiated between Gerald and the previous Alpha of the Morgan pack, Jeff Morgan’s brother.

Coming back to the conversation, he shook his head ruefully. “I’m not too sure about that, but I appreciate the vote of confidence all the same.”

“You deserve it,” McCoy shrugged delicately, her gaze transferring to a spot on the floor before she looked up at Jensen again. “I know I have no right to ask you to…”

“You want me to keep the mating thing from Josh,” Jensen cut her off shrewdly. At her shocked face, he grinned slightly. “Educated guess.”

“I don’t expect you to lie for me,” she hastened to assure him, a nervous look in her eyes. “I just… want to be the one to tell him. When we’re ready. Everything is just too new now, and I don’t want to bring him into the pack until it’s a little less volatile…”

Jensen waved a dismissive hand, sporting a small smile. “I completely agree,” he said. “I don’t want to see my brother get hurt.”

“I promise,” Sandy vowed solemnly, “I will do whatever it takes to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

###

“She’s WHAT?!”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to freak out.”

“I thought you said it was a small development!”

“You’re yelling.”

“I’m not yelling, you’re yelling!”

“I’m not sure you’re using the word ‘yelling’ correctly.”

“SANDY IS YOUR BROTHER’S MATE?!”

Jensen rolled his eyes at his boyfriend’s vehement incredulity. “If you’re going to make me repeat myself, you’re going to have to stop screaming at me,” he said sharply, raising an unimpressed eyebrow and pointedly glaring at Jared.
“Yeah, well…” the Alpha grumbled petulantly, returning his attention to the road as he gunned the Impala, “you’re going to have to relearn the definition of small.”

Jensen snorted. “Babe, I ain’t touching that one with a ten-foot pole.”

Despite himself, and the jibe, Jared snickered, a blush travelling up his neck as he realized the subtle double entendre behind Jensen’s words. “I walked right into that,” he admitted with a wry grin, “but you and I both know that you’re not usually the one to make dirty jokes, least of all about my size.” He leered at Jensen and the artist couldn’t help a grin.

“Now that you’re slightly calmer, you wanna discuss this like adults?” he asked, amused. Without waiting for an answer, Jen’s voice turned curious as he asked, “Why is this bothering you so much?”

Jared waited a few beats, obviously looking for a way to phrase the thoughts running through his mind, and Jensen sat silently, a patient look on his face. “It’s one more thing that ties you to both of them,” the Alpha said finally, a disgruntled look upon his normally carefree face. “It’s one more thing that makes you think you have an obligation to them and the pack, that supersedes your health and your safety. And that,” he added with a grumble, “scares me.”

“Jay, we talked about this,” Jensen reminded his Alpha gently. “My life is tied to every member of the pack, that’s just the way this has to work.”

“Sometimes I hate being the Alpha heir,” Jared mumbled, as if confessing a deep buried secret, which in all likelihood, it was. “The responsibility, the sacrifices, the expectations…I mean, why does my mate have to be in danger? Why is the safety of my mate second to the safety of the pack?” The Alpha huffed, a look of frustration marring his boyish features. “It just never made sense to me,” he finished, shaking his head slightly. “It’s like they don’t realize that I could never be Alpha if anything had to happen to you.”

Jensen sighed lightly. He knew there was no point in arguing that; Jared had made it abundantly clear plenty of times that he had no interest in life if Jensen wasn’t in it. The artist could only hope that if the worst case scenario came to pass, that Jared’s family and all their friends would be able to push him to carry on.

Instead, he said, “This is the life, Jay. And I know that it gets hard sometimes, but we get each other out of the deal…and that makes it all so worth it.” Brushing a lock of Jared’s stubborn hair out of his face, Jensen used the tender motion to cup his lover’s jaw. “This is what we were meant for, Jay. This is what you’re meant for, with or without me. We don’t choose our destiny.”

“I wish we did, Jen,” came the simple answer. “I’d pick a different life for us.” He smirked suddenly, beginning to snicker. “We could be actors.”

Jensen laughed outright. “Sure, Jay,” he replied in amusement, “we’d be the hottest in Hollywood.”

“They could call us J-Squared!” Jared managed to get out through helpless laughter. At the sound, Jensen had to chuckle, shaking his head.

“Alright mister,” he mock-scolded, “I’m cutting you off from whatever you’ve been drinking.”

Jared sent him a grin. “You’re such a trooper, Jen,” he said, when he finally got his mirth under control. “You just take every new development as it comes. You roll with the punches. I love that about you.”

“Yeah?” Jensen sent his lover a tight smile, spotting a small house at the end of the road they were driving on. “Can you remember that for the next two hours or so?”
They had reached the residence of Mikhail Ozera.

“Last chance to back out, baby,” Jared muttered, slowing the car slightly. “He doesn’t know we’re coming…and bear in mind, all we have is an address on this guy. We don’t even know what he looks like.”

Jensen was already nodding before his Alpha could finish arguing his case. “I need to do this, Jay.”

Grimly, Jared nodded. “I thought you were gonna say that.”

The artist held his breath as they pulled into the driveway. A quaint house, welcoming and so damnably normal stood there; a sharp contrast to what Jensen believed to be true.

Suddenly, a flash of bright yellow caught his eye; looking to his right, Jensen saw a tree swing swaying gently back and forth with the breeze. An odd pressure constricted his chest as the remnants of a long-forgotten memory danced behind his eyelids. Almost as if…

“I’ve been here before,” he breathed, almost inaudibly. “A long…long time ago.”

Jared was next to him in an instant. “When, Jen?” he asked gently, an arm wrapping supportively around Jensen’s waist. “When you were a kid? Did it have something to do with your abilities?”

“No,” the dazed artist shook his head briefly. “Not mine,” he clarified when he came back to himself. “My dad’s. I used to play on the swing with Josh. And…”

“Can I help you kids with something?”

Both boys jumped at the appearance of a gruff voice, their heads snapping up to see a middle-aged man glaring at them.

But shock wasn’t what made Jensen speechless.

No; it was the familiarity of the shock of silvery hair and the piercing blue eyes and the jagged scar running from below the man’s ear to his shoulder.

“Micky?” he whispered uncertainly.

The man’s face cleared with that single address, his eyes widening to replace anger with awe.

“Not… no, it can’t be… Jensen?”

~*Jared*~

Jared wondered, briefly, whether there were many more people hiding in the woodwork of his mate’s extensive and apparently vast repertoire of past acquaintances.

“This is unbelievable!” Jensen huffed a small laugh, stepping into the man’s open arms for a giant bear hug while Jared fought against his compulsion to facepalm. “It’s been, what, fifteen years?”

“Sixteen,” Ozera corrected with a chuckle, looking far more welcoming than he did a few seconds ago. “I last saw you when you were two years old and you and Josh were begging your dad to stay longer.”
Jensen laughed. “It’s a wonder you recognized me.”

“Nah,” the man scoffed, “how could I forget those green eyes?” Ruffling Jensen’s hair, he added solemnly. “You know, I thought it’d be Josh searching me out eventually.”

Jared watched in silent observation as his Beta’s face turned quizzical. “Why?”

“Well, after your dad passed away, I knew one of you were going to need me when the time came for your abilities to kick in,” Ozera explained. “I guess I always figured the first-born would be given the Shamanic gifts, but your dad was right.” A nostalgic smile graces his features. “He always told me you would be the one to inherit the gift.”

It was at this point, when Jensen finally faltered, that Jared cleared his throat. It had the dual advantage of alerting Ozera to his presence and giving Jensen time to recoup.

Finally, the man’s gaze fell on the Alpha. “And who might this be?”

“This is my boyfriend,” Jensen answered, smiling gratefully at Jared, who winked back at him before holding out a hand.

“I’m Jared, Sir,” he smiled charmingly. “Jared Padalecki.”

All at once, the welcoming smile fell off Ozera’s face, and he dropped Jared’s hand like it was on fire.

“You’re part of the Padalecki Pack?” he asked in a low hiss.

Once again, Jared was gobsmacked. “You know of my pack?” he asked dumbly, barely noticing it when Jensen suddenly took on a protective glare and stepped in front of him marginally.

“You’re my pack?” Ozera spat. “You’re the Alpha?” Without waiting for an answer, Mikhail turned a devastated expression on Jensen. “Does that mean…are you his mate?”

Jared felt vaguely like he was losing the floor underneath his feet. “How the hell do you know about us?” he demanded, feeling his territorial Alpha creep to the forefront.

But Ozera was already walking away, shaking his head, something akin to grief in his icy blue eyes. “I’m sorry, Jensen,” he rasped out. “I can’t help you. Not when you associate with the likes of them.”

Before Jared could even feel insulted, Jensen responded, all righteous fury.

“What if you know that disdain at, Mikey,” the future Beta snapped, and for the first time, Jared heard for himself the Beta thrum in his mate’s voice. It was an amazing sound, strong and powerful, and one that filled him with so much pride and joy that he could barely find it in himself to get offended at Ozera’s comment. “You’re talking about my pack too, and my family.”

“Your pack?” Ozera threw back, his eyes flashing with anger and resentment. “You have no idea what they want to take from you!”

There were a few tense moments when Jared watched various expressions cross his lover’s face. Suddenly, the Alpha felt like he was balancing on a precipice, waiting to drop.

And then, his Beta spoke.

“My humanity,” Jensen guessed shrewdly, his tone and expression giving nothing away. “You’re
talking about them wanting to turn me into a Werewolf.”

###

Chapter End Notes

As always, much love to all you lovely readers <3
By the Gods, it's been a stupidly long time since I last updated.

Inspiration was sorely lacking for a while, thanks in large part to some personal issues, but then a lightning bolt struck sometime about two weeks ago, and I deleted everything I had, and came up with this, something I hope flows much better with the story than it's predecessor.

I'm so sorry, to everyone who's stuck with me and waited for this chapter. Thank you all SO MUCH for all your love and support and patience... barring any more bouts of debilitating uncertainty about my talent as a writer, I should begin updating a little more regularly again. Once a month, at the very latest.

Thanks so much again, to every last reader here who has stuck with me since the early days of this baby!

A long chapter, to make up for my absence!

Love y'all so much!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared POV*~

Jared had, not a few moments ago, commended his mate’s ability to roll with whatever came at him. To take the hits without a blink, without so much as faltering. It truly was something he loved about the boy. So, so much.

And also, it was confusing the fuck out of him.

Jared watched, speechless, as Jensen barely blinked when he so accurately guessed what Ozera’s, and unwittingly, also Jared’s, biggest fear was. His mate’s expression, his tone, his belligerent stance didn’t falter one inch, and the Alpha had to wonder.

*Why isn’t he even batting an eyelid?*

“Yes!” Ozera, apparently, didn’t share Jensen’s unflappable demeanor, and suddenly, he was in front of the green-eyed boy, hands gripping the tops of his shoulders. “They will take everything from you, and then when you’re in trouble, they will do nothing to help, if it means risking their precious existence! Do you hear me, kid?!” Frustrated, he shook an unmoving Jensen slightly, and that was his mistake.

In a flash, the shock of Jensen *knowing* was pushed to the back of his mind, Jared got in between the older man and his mate, a warning snarl ripping from his teeth. “Don’t touch him.”

Ozera’s eyes widened and he blinked owlishly. There was wariness in his eyes, but there was no
satisfaction to be had from the knowledge, not when everything was so uncertain right now.

A tense silence reigned between the party of three, broken only by the sound of Jared and Ozera’s harsh breathing. As usual, Jensen was totally calm… but why? How could he be?

Before he could think about it, Jensen was pushing him aside, to talk to Mikhail. The Alpha inside him protested vehemently, but couldn’t even think of denying his Beta.

Jensen’s voice was steady and icy. “If all you have to offer me is pointless prejudices, then let me know now, and I can leave.” There was no emotion discernable from his Beta’s posture or tone, and Jared eyed him, partially in awe of Jensen’s ability to be in total control at any given time.

“I…” Ozera was shaking his head, looking dazed. “I can’t. I’m sorry, Jensen, I’m really… I’m so sorry.” The man looked truly torn, remorse making him seem even older in the moment. “I know someone… someone I really cared about, who suffered a fate worse than death by getting involved with those… those *monsters*.”

The resentfully spat word, surprisingly, didn’t even seem directed at Jared, and the Alpha wondered briefly whether Ozera’s problem was with *his kind*, or simply *one of* his kind.

There wasn’t even a moment of hesitation before Jensen nodded. “I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us, Mr. Ozera,” he said, his voice flat and unemotional. It was completely devoid of the warmth he’d had when talking just a few minutes ago, and the older man seemed acutely aware of the fact, cringing at the impersonal edge in Jared’s Beta’s voice. “Have a nice life.”

When Jensen turned around abruptly, utter coldness in his green, flinty eyes, Jared almost felt sorry for the old guy.

Almost.

Jensen brushed past him towards the car, and Jared sent one more measured look at Ozera before following. Part of him felt irrationally guilty for once again, although indirectly, being the cause of tension between Jen and someone he cared about. His mate’s face looked like it’d been carved from stone, and Jared hoped that none of that anger was directed at him.

After all, wasn’t this just something else that Jared’s kind was taking away from Jensen?

~*Jensen*~

Fury wasn’t even in the ballpark of what was coursing through Jensen’s veins.

What the hell kind of right did Micky think he had, bad-mouthing Jensen’s pack like that? His family? His *mate*? If his control was anything less than legendary, Mikhail Ozera would have had significantly more than a mournful look on his face.

Jensen knew full well that he needed to talk to Jared, make sure his lover was alright. He was probably so pissed at coming all the way only to be met with such hatred for the pack, and…

*Fuck*, how much danger had he put the pack in?

Intense fury gave way to compulsive worrying, and Jensen remained stoically silent as the car pulled
on to the freeway. Jared hadn’t spoken yet either, and he wondered briefly, whether his Alpha was worrying about the same thing he was, or just letting Jensen have some space after the fallout.

Either way, it gave him a moment to think.

He was mad at himself, to be honest. This entire venture had been such a waste of time, and they were even further back than the drawing board, with his Shamanic abilities. Jensen had no idea where that left them… what other possible avenues he had to explore.

Had the information that Katherine had, truly died with her?

Jensen wasn’t sure anymore. The thought of quitting so early made his gut churn, so he knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would continue searching… but at the same time, maybe he had to begin to face the possibility that the intel was a little more out of reach than he’d anticipated.

Unless…

_Rosen._

His ancestor had seemed respectful towards his mating bond with Jared. He had helped him then, and could help him again, if Jensen managed to make contact with him. All it would really take was to heal someone an inch from death, thereby using enough of his own life force to enter into a comatose state long enough to interact with the Shaman.

_Right. Come on, Ackles, this sounds ridiculous, even in your own head. Can you imagine selling Jay on this?_

Attention diverted at the thought of his boyfriend, Jensen figured he could at least try to put the future pack Alpha’s mind at ease. Jared, it sometimes seemed, was one of the very few good things in his life, and he was determined to be strong, if not for him, then with him.

Shifting slightly in his seat, he turned his body towards, and raised his eyes to his mate, who seemed focused on the road ahead.

“Are you alright, Jay?”

Jensen saw the minute jerk that Jared’s body gave, obviously shocked by the question. This made him curious, because did his lover really think that Jensen wouldn’t notice how uncharacteristically quiet he was being? Did he think he didn’t care? Or was it something else completely?

“If you’re worrying about what Ozera will do with his knowledge of the pack, don’t,” he ventured a guess, his voice retaining some of the hardness it had when dealing with Micky. “I’ll make very sure that he can’t do anything with it,” he added, a very real, very frank threat lingering in his tone. Distracted by the thought of everything that had just happened, Jensen found himself getting angry again. “I cannot even begin to believe that prejudicial bullshit he was spouting!”

Now, Jared’s head snapped towards him, and there was no mistaking the confusion in his hazel eyes. “Jen, I thought… aren’t you mad?”

“What?” It was Jensen’s turn to frown in puzzlement. Hadn’t he just been expressing his anger? “Of course I am, Jay, I’m furious! The nerve of him… he had no goddamn right to say the things he did! I swear to God, if there was any less history, I would have probably been throwing the punches instead of rolling with them.” Green eyes flashed fire as Jensen curled his fingers into a fist, the mere thought of punching his dad’s oldest friend in the face becoming quite appealing in the wake of the man insulting his family.
A soft grip on his fist brought him back to the moment, and he breathed a sigh that let out all his anger with it. He flipped his palm open to tangle his fingers with Jared, a half-smile forming on his face as he relocated his attention to his boyfriend.

Who, he noticed, still looked confused.

After a gentle squeeze of his hand, Jared finally pulled the car over to the side of the road before turning to face him. “I didn’t mean Ozera,” he clarified in a tentative voice. “I meant me. Us. Aren’t you mad at the pack for being the reason you had to give up history with yet another person who, in some way, was so important to you?”

Really, if he was any less mad at Ozera, he would have seen this one coming.

As it were, he didn’t, and Jensen cursed himself for being so blind to the reason behind his mate’s brooding. The very idea of the pack being to blame for this was ridiculous, in his mind, but it would make sense that all Jared would see, was something he was ‘giving up’ for the greater good of the pack.

Smiling softly, fondly, anger all but forgotten, Jensen traded his hold on Jared’s hand to instead cup his jaw. Leaning forward, he pressed a chaste, but firm kiss to the Alpha’s lips.

“You’re an idiot,” he whispered, but the sheer affection in his voice showed that he meant something completely different. “History in no way excuses the present, Jay, and Ozera was presently acting like an asshole. If you honestly think that I would be happy to have contact with him after he disparaged our pack, and our family, then…”

“Our pack?” Jared was smiling now, heat and unfathomable joy in his bottomless eyes. “Our family?”

Jensen blushed slightly, having only just realized the words that had slipped out without his permission. “Figured y’all came part and parcel with the Beta deal,” he shrugged, all casual and light and teasing, even though he knew his eyes were a dead giveaway to the truth those words unveiled. “Unless of course, you don’t want to share?” he joked.

“You’re amazing.”

“It’s been said,” he nodded, grinning at his lover’s laugh. “And…” the Beta decided to go for broke, “since I feel like it’s going to take you another couple months before you pluck up the courage to ask me… how do you feel about turning me?”

The serious corner their conversation had taken was punctuated by a sudden heaviness that permeated the air around them, almost a tangible thing that settled between the couple.

Jared, looking more serious than the green-eyed artist had ever seen him, took both Jensen’s hands in his. His hazel eyes were intense, endless emotions in their depths. “How do you feel about it?”

There wasn’t a moment’s hesitation.

“I’d be happy to.”

~*Jared*~
He was almost completely sure he was hearing wrong, because there was no way he was lucky enough to find Jensen, have him wholeheartedly accept the existence of werewolves, then happily agree to become pack Beta, and then still also be willing to give up his humanity without any hint of resentment or anger or bitterness.

What on earth could he have done to deserve such unmitigated happiness?

“Baby, don’t joke about this,” he whispered, awe making his jaw slack and his throat a little tight. “Because I can’t…”

“Jay.” Jensen’s voice was firm as his hands framed Jared’s face. “I would never joke about this, not ever. We both know that turning me will send out a message of strength and unity of the pack, to any other packs who would think you weak for picking a human mate. Not to mention, I’d be able to actually protect you from a threat better, I’d be able to protect the pack better, as one of you.” His beautiful Beta took a deep breath, and Jared patiently waited him out, mostly because he couldn’t talk through the lump in his throat. “I won’t lie to you and say that the thought, and the idea, doesn’t scare me, because it does,” Jen admitted softly, his voice clear and sincere. “But not because I think for one moment that I don’t want this life… only because I think that you need to be fully certain that this is what you want, as well.”

And the idea that Jared could ever want anything else was so ludicrous that it almost made him laugh. He didn’t, though, which was probably good, because the sound probably would have been tinged with a slight amount of total hysteria.

Finally, he found his voice. “How could I not want that? How could I not want you for forever?”

Jensen smiled at that, shaky and amazed, but no less earnest. “If you’re in… I’m in.”

“I can’t believe it,” Jared breathed, resting his forehead against his mate’s reverentially. “I can’t believe you would do this for me.”

“Oh, I’m not doing it for you, babe, I’m only in it for the badass title,” Jensen’s response was instantaneous and completely matter-of-fact, only the sparkling green eyes and slight breathiness in his voice a giveaway to his mirth. “The sex, too, but even that’s more of a fringe benefit.” The teasing response served to break the tension in the air between them, Alpha and Beta laughing breathlessly at the significant turn their relationship had just taken.

“What happened to never joking about something like this?” Jared teased softly, closing the distance between them and nipping softly at his Beta’s bottom lip.

“The mood needed lightening,” Jensen murmured, grinning against Jared’s lips. “But I wasn’t totally joking, because I’m not just doing this for you, Jay, and I need you to know that.” The artist pulled back enough to lock gazes with him. “I’m doing this for us, too, and for the pack, and yes, for myself as well. Because this will give me my forever with you, as much as it will give you your forever with me. This opens up a future for me that guarantees you in it, and that’s the only future I really want anymore.”

“Jen…” Jared didn’t know what to say, couldn’t even speak at that moment, so he did the only thing he could do. He kissed the love of his life with as much fervor and passion as one man could have. It felt like a promise and a plea and a fucking brand all at once… it was heated and soft and passionate and thorough and perfect.

Just like Jensen himself.
When they finally pulled apart for air, it was Jensen who breathlessly stated, “I want to do it on graduation night.”

The love of his life was agreeing to spend the rest of their lives together, loving Jared enough to step into a whole different world for him. The absolute least he could do was heed any demand his lover had of the situation, but that didn’t mean he didn’t want to know… “Why, love? Of course, I don’t mind, we can do this anytime you wanted, but is there any reason?”

“Not really,” Jensen shrugged truthfully. “I just feel like it would be fitting. Like starting a new chapter.”

Jared nodded slowly, wrapping his mind around his mate’s thoughts. “Graduation night it is, then,” he breathed after a moment, smiling slowly, softly, brilliantly. “God, Jen… I don’t even know… I mean, this is big! Where do we go from here, what do we do?”

It was meant to convey his awe, and his incredible happiness; an entirely rhetorical question. So, of course, his lover had an answer for it.

“Where we go, is home,” Jensen laughed, pulling away and guiding Jared’s straying hands back to the wheel of the car. “And what we do… well, how about you tell me more about what to expect from all this.”

The Alpha laughed, but didn’t dream of denying his Beta. Stealing one more kiss, the Padalecki heir couldn’t help but be fiercely thankful for that idiot Ozera, and his prejudice against Weres.

“Well,” Jared started as soon as he’d eased the Impala back on to the road, “I guess the first and most important thing you need to know, is that there are two main, but distinctly different bites involved. There’s the Mating Bite, which will bind us together as mates, and the Turning Bite, which is equally self-explanatory,” he rolled his eyes slightly at the unoriginal names, shooting sideways a rueful grin at his mate. “For most, the Mating Bite is the only one that matters, since it’s so rare to have a human mate, but for us, the Bites will have to happen separately, even though they occur in the same spot.”

“The side of my neck?”

Jared nodded in confirmation of Jensen’s guess. “Just above your pulse, yeah. We’ll do the Turning Bite first, because the Mating Bite generally only occurs when both mates are in the ‘form’, per se, that they plan to be in forever. So basically, we could’ve undergone our Mating Bites already, if you’d planned on staying human.”

“Is that why you haven’t Bitten me yet?” Jensen asked, a little furrow appearing on his forehead as he frowned, tilting his head curiously to the side.

“That,” Jared nodded, shrugging slightly, “but mostly because I didn’t want to do it without you knowing explicitly what it meant.”

Jensen’s eyes were soft when the Alpha glanced back at him, and it made Jared warm on the inside. “You’re such a sap, Jay.”

The Padalecki heir chuckled, but didn’t deny it. Instead, he reached over to grab his mate’s hand, bringing Jensen’s palm to his lips for a soft kiss that was telling of just how much a sap he was willing to be when it came to his beautiful Beta.

“Moving on,” he continued, his voice softened with ill-disguised affection. “After I perform the Turning Bite, the transition should take 24 hours. We haven’t had a Turning in long years – not while I’ve been alive, at least – but from what I know, it’s a painless process. Your first shift,
though…” Now, Jared winced, some of his excitement dimming. “That’s gonna be a hellish experience.”

Jensen smirked. “Don’t sugarcoat it for me, babe.”

“Sorry, love,” he sent his mate an apologetic look, suddenly nervous. “If you want to…”

“I’m not backing out, Jay,” his Beta interrupted, steady and calm. “Promise. I have a very high pain threshold, and like you said, it’s just the first shift, right? It’ll get better?”

Jared nodded emphatically, trying not to show his relief and probably failing abysmally. “Immediately. Your body only needs the one shift to acquaint itself with your new bone structure… after that, it will come naturally to you.”

“That’s alright, then,” Jen nodded firmly, looking determined. “Keep explaining.”

“As much as the Turning Bite is fairly simple,” he obliged, navigating smoothly around a bend in the road, “the Mating Bite, isn’t. Like I said, you both have to be in your forms in order for the Bite to take. I don’t mean physically,” Jared anticipated the question before it came, smiling faintly as his mate’s mouth shut with a barely audible click, “I just mean that you have to be Were for it to take. More than that, we have to be certain what type of Were you are.”

Jensen shifted in his seat, leaning his back against the door so that he could face the Alpha. “Type, as in…”

“An alpha, a beta, or an omega.”

“I thought that I would automatically be a Beta?” Jensen’s voice was patiently curious, even as his hand found its way to push through his hair.

The Padalecki heir nodded, vaguely enthused about getting to explain all the semantics to his lover. Suddenly, he was really glad for all those Pack lessons every pup was forced to take, growing up. “You will be my Beta, so by position of authority, you would rule over the entire pack except me,” Jared agreed, allowing that point. “But being my Beta isn’t necessarily mutually inclusive or exclusive to being a beta.”

“So, I can be either of those three types of wolf, and still be your Beta at the end of it,” Jensen summarized, nodding slowly. “Beta, being a position in the pack, and alpha, beta or omega, being a way of life. I got it.”

Jared just barely managed to temper his proud beam, settling for grinning at his mate ridiculously wide. “That’s actually another reason why the Turning Bite needs to happen first. Mating Bites happen differently, dependent on the types of wolves mating. For example, alphas bite, but omegas don’t. So, if an alpha had to mate with an alpha, both wolves would Bite each other for the bond to be completed. But if an alpha mates with a beta or an omega, he or she will be the only one that Bites.”

“Two of the same kinds of wolf Bite each other, but if they’re different types, the ‘higher ranking’ one Bites,” Jensen nodded his understanding, placing air quotes on the ‘higher ranking’. He frowned briefly, lost in thought for a few seconds. Jared stayed quiet, recognizing that his Beta had to ruminate slightly before he could voice his thought. “That isn’t really fair, though, is it?” he finally asked, biting his lip dubiously. “Doesn’t that give betas the power to have control over omegas, and alphas, the power to have control over betas and omegas? I mean, I know the packs work like family, but surely there’s an ever present threat of forced matings?”
Jared blinked owlishly. “I think you were a wolf in your previous life.”

“That would be ironic,” his mate snorted, making the Alpha grin. “But why do you say so?”

Shaking his head as if to dislodge some of the amazement he was feeling, Jared elaborated. “There’s a lot of history that goes back a long time ago, to when that was a problem. See, packs weren’t as common an occurrence as they are now, because pack wars were fairly frequent. Most ‘packs’ consisted of the simplest power triage; an Alpha, a Beta, and an omega. Some stayed in one place, but most of them traveled, mostly because it was a time in our history when humans began to question and suspect our existence. Anyway, the brutalization of omegas weren’t a rare occurrence back then, mostly because of Alphas who abused their power. Things began to cool down when humans began to think of werewolves as fantasy again, but by the time that happened, population numbers were dwindled to near-disastrous numbers.”

“They were killing omegas?”

His lover sounded faintly sick, and Jared couldn’t blame him a single bit. It was a disgusting, horrific part of their history that had made the Alpha himself nauseous to learn about. It made him fervently glad for the kind of society they lived in today, where the prejudices against omegas were all but gone, save for the few stray, narrow-minded dicks.

Nodding grimly, he continued his story. “Killing them wasn’t the only reason our numbers were so reduced, though. See, omegas are child-bearers as well; they’re the ones that the survival of our race are predominantly contingent on. Betas can also carry kids, but usually only one at a time, and never very many in a lifetime. Omegas are caretakers by nature, so it was almost natural progression for their biology to allow them to bear more children than a beta. That finally became clear, albeit almost too late. So, our race began to restructure. The first thing that happened, was land being distributed into areas and territory. If more than one permanent pack resided in that territory, the Alphas either had to fight or negotiate which of them got to take up the mantle of Alpha to that territory. Bigger packs were born, and the Alpha of each of those territories became responsible for their own land and packs. Laws protecting omegas were the next thing to come into effect; it came up to the responsibility of pack Alphas to expedite that process across their respective packs.”

Jensen was listening intently to every word he was saying, nodding occasionally, his eyes narrowed in concentration. He was chewing on his lip again, a surefire sign that he was already deep in thought about all of it, and Jared took a moment to fall in love with him all over again, for being so invested in being part of Jared’s world.

Their world, soon.

“Obviously, progress has been made,” Jensen finally spoke, resting his chin in his palm, where it was propped up with an elbow on the back of the bucket seats. “I’ve never seen an omega being mistreated in our pack, and the alphas and betas have rarely flexed their positions, that I’ve seen.”

“Yeah,” Jared nodded, even though those had been more statements than questions. He resolutely bit back his beam, as well, at the continued referral of the Padalecki pack as theirs. “It took a few decades for the others to follow suit, but our pack did catch on early. My dad says that the Padalecki line was full of progressive thinkers, so our generations of Alphas led their packs with the interests of the omegas being parallel with the interests of alphas and betas, even before the laws were passed on it. It meant that, when it became official, there was little to no adjustment to the Padalecki pack, because by then, equal treatment of omegas was the natural way of things.”

Jensen grinned suddenly, impish. “If I was a wolf in my last life, I think I definitely still would’ve fallen for a Padalecki.”
Jared huffed out a surprised laugh, amazed once more at his mate’s ability to lighten such a heavy topic of discussion without trivializing it.

“Guess I must have been a Padalecki in my last life, too, then,” he grinned back, eyes soft. “Because I don’t think there ever existed a lifetime where you and I didn’t fall in love with each other.”

Jensen smiled back, a moment suspended in time, wherein they both silently acknowledged how true that sentiment felt.

“Said it once,” Jensen eventually broke the silence, “and I’ll say it again. This is why you get laid so often.”

Jared smirked. “Can I tell Chad that, if he asks?”

He was answered with a spluttering laugh. “That would be a no. Hard no.”

~*Chris*~

Christian Kane knew two people in this world, better than he even knew himself sometimes, and that was his mate – his beautiful, wonderful, incredible Sophia – and his best friend. His brother.

As far as deep thinking went, Jensen had certain go-to activities when something was weighing on him. He either sparred at the crack of dawn, or he took a gentler approach, like art, or working on a car, or plucking something on his guitar.

Today, the copper-coloured wolf felt, was a day for the latter.

Mr. Beaver had long since given Jensen a copy of the lab’s keys, on account of him wanting to spend his extra time on his “pet project” as it had been dubbed, and if his best friend was going to be spending his Saturday night doing work, Chris figured it would have to be for something challenging enough to his mind that it left little room for rumination.

And there he was, gloves and goggles and lab coat firmly in place as he scrutinized the beaker in front of him, making notes on a legal pad with an expression of deep concentration etched on his face. Chris took a moment to study him; he took in the deep bags underneath his eyes, which could be seen even through the goggles, that meant he still wasn’t sleeping well. He observed the deep set of Jensen’s brow and the unconscious clench of his jaw, which meant that whatever was going on, was important to his best friend. Lastly, he eyed the otherwise-imperceptible slump in Jensen’s shoulders.

That more than anything spoke of how much the past few weeks were weighing on the guy in front of him.

Jared had met up with the bunch of them at the club, pouty because Jensen had opted out of coming with him, and relayed the day’s events to them. Chris was so proud of Jensen for sticking up for the pack and proving, once again, how much of a Beta he already was, but at the same time, he was kind of worried about what that meant for Jensen and his gift.

And also worried about what Jensen might do, now, to unlock that part of himself, because Chris knew as surely as he knew his own name that Jensen wouldn’t hesitate to try something dangerous in the name of helping the pack.
He hadn’t mentioned his thoughts before Chad started telling them about finding Jen on Friday night, and the newest incident with their friend’s Beta voice. He gave the appropriate grin at the reminder that his best friend was being a Beta without even knowing it, but his mind was more preoccupied by the fact that Chad had found his friend ambling around town. Apparently, he hadn’t wanted to disturb Chris or put any pressure on his since he was housing his mate and future sister-in-law.

It was that moment when Chris realized how little time he’d spent with Jensen recently. Not counting the moments they were in a group, but rather one-on-one best friend time. They’d both gotten caught up with everything going on, and because of that, Jensen hadn’t felt comfortable coming to him, and that killed the long-haired alpha.

When he’d thought Sophia to be pregnant, Jen was the first person he called, and thought to call. There was no one else he even considered going to – which in itself, was amazing, since his Alpha and his Beta should’ve been the first ones – because he trusted Jensen to come through for him and be there for him when he was falling apart.

Friday night didn’t sound as serious as that, but he was doing something wrong if Jensen ever felt like he couldn’t just show up on Chris’ doorstep and be welcomed with both arms opened wide.

Which was what brought him here on a Saturday night, leaving Sophia with Jared and the rest of the pack at the club.

Guilt gnawed at him as he thought again about the obvious signs of his best friend’s distress; how had he missed all that?

“You just going to stand there all night, or you coming in, Kane?”

He jumped as Jensen’s amused and muted voice rang out clearly in the still air between them. Scowling half-heartedly at his friend’s ability to do that, Chris stepped fully into the lab by way of answer.

Taking a small, uncertain step closer, he dug his hands into his pockets. “Jared’s inconsolable because you chose lab over hanging with us.”

“He seemed fine when I left, if a little grumpy,” Jensen answered, a bemused smile on his lips as he finally shifted in his seat and looked up at Chris. Calculating green eyes scanned over him and Chris felt like his best friend knew everything he needed to know from just that one look. “And if he’s the inconsolable one,” Jensen continued shrewdly, lifting his goggles to perch them atop his head, “then why are you the one here?”

Damn surrogate little brothers and their mind-reading powers. “I miss you.”

Like he always did, Jensen realized the deeper meaning behind the words; not that Chris was missing his presence at the club today, but that he missed them and their friendship and their company.

When they’d first become friends, it had just been the two of them. And then after a few weeks, they’d joined the pack, and Chris knew it was going to be different, but even then, they still made time for each other, but since the attacks and their mates and everything else had come into play, they’d put stuff like that on a back burner, which should have been fine but it wasn’t.

Because no matter what, they were still each other’s best friends and brothers.

“I miss you too, Chris,” Jensen smiled softly, leaning forward slightly in his chair and resting his elbows on the lab counter in front of him. “It’s been a stupidly crazy time lately.”
Brow furrowing, the alpha crossed his arms over his chest. “Why didn’t you come to my place instead of wandering around like a lost soul last night?”

“I thought that would’ve been obvious.” Jensen, instead of defensive, sounded genuinely confused. “You have your mate, and your mate’s pregnant sister living with you. The absolute last thing you needed to worry about was me as well.”

And Chris knew, logically, where Jensen was coming from, and could see the reasoning behind his decision, but it still left a bitter taste in his mouth, because it was his *job* to worry about Jensen. Before the whole Beta business, Jensen was his little brother, and as far as he was concerned, nothing had changed. So when did his best friend begin to believe that he wasn’t among Chris’ priorities?

Huffing slightly, he glared at Jen, with no real heat. “You’ve never allowed your problems and your issues with Jared to get in the way whenever I needed you. You nearly put off your entire fucking trip for Jared to meet your uncle when you thought I needed you, because we thought I got Sophia knocked up. Why don’t you think I’d do the same for you?”

“C’mon man,” Jensen was already shaking his head while Chris was talking, “that’s not the same thing and you know it.”

“Yeah?” the alpha challenged, his voice defiant with just a touch of petulance. “What’s different?”

Jensen sent him an infuriatingly cheeky grin. “I was almost certain that Jared wasn’t pregnant.”

Despite his best intentions, Chris huffed a begrudging laugh, shaking his head slightly. The tension between them snapped and the alpha took a few steps forward, only stopping when Jensen herded him away from the work bench and to the back of the class, mumbling about toxic chemicals and keeping an appropriate proximity away from them.

As they took their seats, facing each other, Chris took a deep breath, trying to find the words that would articulate exactly what he was thinking and feeling.

“When you came back, after your trip to your hometown… the one when you went to fetch your dad after he got into that gambling debt?” The long-haired alpha waited until his best friend nodded in acknowledgment. “When you came back, before you even began to tell me the story… you said it was good to be *home*.”

Comprehension dawned in bright green eyes, which softened as Jensen smiled slightly. “I remember. Home felt more like your place than my own.”

“Exactly,” he nodded emphatically, “so why did that change? I know you’ve got another home, with Jared, now, but that doesn’t mean your old home won’t always be open to you.”

His best friend exhaled shakily, running a hand through his hair, and it was easy to see that he was touched. “Your place still feels like home to me, Chris. A home away from home, at least. I just didn’t want to impose on you and Soph, and I especially didn’t want to spook Tessa. It must be hard enough for her to adjust to a new environment, and being pregnant, and the strain of leaving her old pack and family… the last thing that girl needed was to inadvertently become a part of my drama.”

The fact that Jensen thought about Tessa like that, given that she was so recent to the pack and coming from a rivalling pack no less, made Chris pause in disbelief. He’d always been amazed by Sherry Padalecki’s sheer heart as a Beta, but Jensen… he took it to a whole new level without even trying to. Without even being conscious of doing it.
He cared for all of them so deeply, and so easily; putting the pack above himself came naturally, and prioritizing the pups, more naturally still. He was empathetic and understanding and intuitive and strong...

How anyone could’ve ever doubted that Jensen was their Beta, was beyond him.

“Promise you’ll at least call me next time?” Chris finally settled, realizing that talking a Beta out of rationalizing from their hearts was as pointless a feat as trying to persuade an Alpha not to protect their Beta.

A grin lifted Jensen’s lips, completely unaware of the reaction he’d inspired in the alpha. “Got it, mom.”

As far as Chris was concerned, he was completely justified as he grabbed his little brother in a headlock.

“Come on,” the alpha laughed breathlessly a few minutes later, from where they were both hunched over. “You haven’t hung out with us in ages. Your mystery experiments can stay till Monday, tonight you’re at the club with all of us.”

Jensen grinned back at him, and the sight was becoming so rare that it warmed Chris up from head to toe. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

Snorting at the irony, because technically Chris was the one who was supposed to be following Jensen’s orders in the pack hierarchy, the alpha headed towards the door, sauntering as he gave his best friend time to shrug into his leather jacket.

“It’s gonna be great,” he declared when Jensen joined him, locking up the lab behind him. “Although I’m not promising that I won’t drug you before the end of the night. Maybe then you’ll actually get some honest-to-God rest.”

Nudging Jensen playfully, Chris dug in his pockets for his keys, excited to finally have a night out that included his best friend.

In his eagerness, he completely missed the oddly calculating look that came over Jensen’s face.

~*Jensen*~

This was a bad idea.

No, scratch that, it was a fucking terrible idea. Worst of all, he knew that it was, he knew it.

Jensen took in a shaky breath, rolling the offending object between his fingers. It was a little after one in the morning, and he’d just gotten back home after spending an admittedly fun night with Jared and their friends at the club. For all the fun he’d had, though, he still couldn’t get Chris’ words out of his mind.

*I’m not promising that I won’t drug you before the end of the night. Maybe then you’ll actually get some honest-to-God rest.*

The two little white tablets looked so innocuous in his palm, especially given how undecided Jensen
was about it. It wasn’t technically drugs – although he’d certainly thought about that option before deciding that tripping wasn’t going to help him – but they were incredibly strong sleeping pills. It had been prescribed to Eric a long time ago, after the accident and back before he found more peace at the bottom of a bottle, but having them, with a finger of whiskey, he knew had the ability to knock him on his ass and then some.

And it would keep him under, during his nightmare.

Jensen knew it was a bad idea. No, to reiterate his earlier correction, it was a genuinely fucking terrible idea. Not only because he was resorting to dangerous chemical means to get more than three hours’ worth of sleep, now, but also because he had no idea what it would do to him, seeing that nightmare through to the end. He was doing it because it was his last option to try and get some answers; to try to uncover just one more piece of the puzzle.

At what expense, though? What other horrible things would he be forced to bear witness to?

Does it matter, if it means getting the answers?

Jensen slumped, torn between his own good judgement and the little voice in his head that insisted he take any risks necessary to protect his new family.

In a sudden, decisive movement, without giving himself a chance to think about it, Jensen threw the pills into his mouth, flicking his head back and dry swallowing it. The pills were one thing, but he couldn’t bring himself to have it with the alcohol, unwilling to put himself in such an irresponsible and dangerous haze. Bitterness exploded on his tongue, and nerves made his skin clammy as he contemplated reliving that awful nightmare and seeing it through to its conclusion.

He remembered with stark clarity, how scary the nightmare had been the first and only other time it had happened.

But, it was what it was. He had made his decision now.

He went through his nighttime ritual on auto-pilot, showering and brushing his teeth, and then pulling on old sweats and a t-shirt. He checked the doors and the windows systematically, mechanically, rinsed the glass that previously held a shot of whiskey, and filled it with water before ascending the stairs to his bedroom.

His phone buzzed on his nightstand as he tentatively pulled the sheets over himself. A glance at the illuminated screen told him it was Jared calling, and the sudden and intense temptation to pick up the phone and ask his mate to come over, bowled Jensen over.

The prospect of what he was about to do seemed a lot less scary when he thought of his Alpha being by his side.

But Jensen hadn’t survived as long as he had, in the ways that he had, by giving into his fears. No, he had always faced them head-on, and dealt with the consequences thereof, later. So instead, the green-eyed artist determinedly turned the ringer on his cell off, flipping it to face downwards as he did.

This was something he had to face alone.

The thought had no sooner crossed his mind before everything began to blur in front of his eyes. A jaw-cracking yawn almost split his face in two, and despite his anxiety, his body began to relax. At the sound of some pipes groaning, Jensen’s eyes shot back open – fuck, when had he even closed them? – and he immediately chastised himself for getting spooked. It was going to be a long night if
he kept jumping at every sound.

Taking deep breaths to force himself to relax, the future Beta curled one arm underneath his pillow, resting his head against it and folding himself into a ball. Lethargy crept over his body, a slow-acting poison, and his last thought before darkness and confusion began to encroach on his awareness, was that he hoped Jared… hoped Jare— J’red…

Darkness.

Howling winds nearly bending the trees around him.

The feel of crunchy soil against his palm.

Jensen clenched his fists involuntarily, the start of this vision-slash-nightmare now so familiar to him. The sand pressed into the soft flesh of his palms, and he barely resisted the urge to look down, knowing that his surrounding were more important than finding out whether the sand had managed to stain his dream-palms.

A flash of brown and amber.

Forcing himself to look closer, harder, Jensen realized suddenly that the flash, was someone shifting from their wolf form. The man who was attacked… a wolf?

Jeering and taunts filling the still air around him.

A woman’s malevolent cackle.

The dark eyes of the man he had protected all his life.

A whimper left his lips unbidden, as he felt the man’s pain as though it were his own. Betrayal and agony took up residence in his heart, making it difficult for Jensen to comprehend anything outside of the sheer emotional hurt.

The mere silhouette of a figure, hunched inwards, broken sounds ripping from his body.

Stumbling forward, Jensen tried to see who it was, whose pain he had been experiencing for all these weeks. “Who are you?” he whispered helplessly, squinting into the darkness. “I can’t help you if I don’t even know who you are.”

“I trusted you!” he rasped, agony of both a physical and emotional nature evident in his voice. “I loved you! I… I loved you… and you… you took everything from me… how could you?”

No matter that he’d heard it all before, Jensen’s heart twisted all the same. His own empathy became mixed with the other man’s pain, making a volatile concoction inside him.

“Loved me?” the other man sneered, his cold voice completely devoid of remorse. “There is no such thing as love in this world we call ours. You always were the weaker of us, believing in such naïve notions. No, there is only power, and I am the only one worthy of wielding it.”

Curiosity overcame the future Beta, and instead of focusing on the man, he now focused on the attacker, allowing their conversation to flow over his head.

Besides, he knew their words better than he knew the back of his hand.
They shouted back and forth, Jensen clenching his jaw against the man’s pain, and after a solid minute, all he managed to make out was the black hair and the flash of a black tattoo that peeked out from underneath the attacker’s t-shirt. He was about to try to go in closer when his cue to step back sounded.

Silence reigned for a few painful beats, before his dark chuckle filled the air.

“What is the worth of the opinion of a dying man?”

A choked gasp left Jensen’s lips as he backed away, somehow managing to pale in dream form as he realized what the next part of the nightmare was. Pinching himself desperately, Jensen wasn’t surprised when he didn’t wake up.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered painfully, focusing his mournful green eyes on the unsuspecting man. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how to help you, I can’t help you.”

Another flash as the wolf burst from its human skin, teeth bared and aimed at the crouching man’s jugular.

Jensen took in a shuddering breath, unable to tear his eyes away. A cry ripped from his lips, in time with the man’s first scream, as the first tear of flesh produced a spray of dark red blood. He was shaking all over, harsh sobs ripping through his body as he was forced to watch the man become brutalized to the accompanying sounds of a woman’s maniacal laughter and the black wolf’s snapping teeth.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” he whispered, one hand tangled in his hair, phantom agony in his chest.

“Oh, child.”

Jensen nearly jumped a foot in the air as a soft, maternal voice materialized behind him. Whirling around, he saw a beautiful young woman with eyes the colour of melted steel and a soft waterfall of brunette curls cascading down her back. She was tall, with flawless porcelain skin, but an expression of pained pity and melancholy twisted her stunning features.

Jensen fought to get his breathing under control and fought harder still to ignore the screams and ripping sounds that were coming from behind him. “You can see me…”

Instead of answering, or confirming, she reached out towards him. Jensen was frozen in place, his heart beating a mile a minute.

“You were never meant to be here this long.”

Her voice was soft, tinged with old grief, and some part of Jensen – the part that was still valiantly trying to block out the sounds of cold-blooded murder – recognized that she was studiously avoiding looking at the gruesome sight behind him.

Who was she, and how was it that she was here?

Before he could ask, a supernaturally icy hand cupped his cheek. Wide green eyes flicked up to meet soft grey ones.

She placed her palm over his eyes, forcing them closed. “Wake up.”
He came awake thrashing and flailing and gasping, taking in deep, choking breaths like he was starving for air.

Which he was.

Jensen latched on to the arms that were trying to steady him, uncaring of whose they were, just trying to convince himself that he was out of that thrice damned place. A vague ripping sound reached his ears, reminiscent of the sound of the man’s flesh tearing open, and a blind panic descended over him.

Leaping off the bed, Jensen took off running towards the bathroom, skidding on his knees and just barely lifting the toilet lid before he was retching violently, throwing up everything but his organs, it seemed. His throat ached and sweat mixed with tears on his face, but he remained hunched over as his stomach rebelled. He wrapped one arm absently around his middle, clenching his jaw tight and shutting his eyes as his insides spasmed weakly once, twice more.

After a few minutes that seemed to stretch like hours, Jensen finally became cognizant of soft whispers and big, warm hands rubbing circles into his back and pushing back his sweaty hair.

“Alright, kiddo, it’s okay, you’re okay… just calm down, let it out, you’re alright…”

Without opening his eyes, he whispered back, “Dad?”

“Yeah, sport.” There was no mistaking the stark note of relief that came into Eric’s voice. His foster father kept rubbing his back as he spoke, and Jensen found himself straightening, turning into the familiar touch. “I came home earlier than I expected. That’s it, you’re doing great, kid… take your time…”

Eric kept up his nonsensical encouragement and Jensen was surprised to find that it actually helped him calm down slightly; although, it could have just been the familiar hands that had coaxed him through nightmares before. Before long, he was being urged to his feet, aided by Eric’s arm around his waist, and herded towards the sink. Rinsing his mouth out thoroughly and splashing his face with cold water went a long way towards restoring Jensen to some semblance of rationality, but it was after he wiped his face, when Eric wrapped strong arms around his still-trembling form, that Jensen actually let himself believe that he was out of that awful place.

Burrowing in close, he allowed his dad to ground him with a tight hug. “That was some nightmare, sport,” the mumbled comment puffed hot air over his head. “You okay? Want to talk about something?”

*Just witnessed a man getting ripped limb from limb without any way to help him… but don’t worry about it, Dad, hazard of being a descendant of a Shaman and the mate of a werewolf.* “No.”

“You sure?” Eric asked, concerned, pulling back to look Jensen in the eye. It was easy to see the deep concern and residual fear that resided in his foster father’s eyes, and the sight of it, along with the tear in the man’s shirt that was obviously made by him when he’d woken up struggling, made a beat of guilt thrum through him.

But still. There was no room for Eric to get messed up in this budding war. He couldn’t allow that to happen, not especially now, when they were just returning to being father and son. Just remembering how to be a family once again. He couldn’t jeopardize all that by allowing Eric to even get a foot in the door of what was turning out to be a veritable battlefield. He would never forgive himself if it led to the man getting hurt.
So despite his own pain, the future Beta nodded weakly, raising red-rimmed eyes to his foster father as he fought to push back the memory of the murder he’d forced himself to bear witness to.

Stepping out of the warm embrace, Jensen took a shaky breath. “I’m fine, now, Dad.” After a moment’s hesitation, he added, “Thanks… you know. For being there.”

Eric scrutinized him for a few long moments, narrowed eyes taking their fill and contemplating whether to let Jensen go at his word or not. The green-eyed artist forced himself to stay still, focusing on the cool feel of his pendant against his chest to keep the images of his nightmare at bay.

Without warning, Eric put his arm around Jensen’s shoulders, gently and wordlessly steering him out of the bathroom. The artist stayed compliant in his foster father’s grip, moving past his room and down the stairs, to the living room, all without a word of protest. He didn’t even speak when Eric set him on the couch, tossing him the afghan that lay on the back, but then, it was because he knew where his dad was going with this.

They hadn’t done this since Jody was still alive, but damned if Jensen didn’t remember.

Tucking his legs underneath him, Jensen spread out the throw as Eric popped in a disk. A grin quirked his lips when he recognized the opening credits to *The Shining*. It had always been an odd quirk with them, but watching horror movies served to be the best distractions; Jody had always said that seeing fictional nightmares, made them remember that their own nightmares were exactly the same thing.

As Eric settled on the other side of the couch, Jensen consoled himself with the thought that maybe, just maybe, the nightmare-slash-vision really was fictional. Maybe it was just a truly morbid way of getting a message across, since whoever was contacting him, didn’t know how else to do it. Just because he felt the pain, didn’t mean that all parts of it were true.

God, he hoped so.

Whether it was, or wasn’t, there was nothing left to be done for it that night. Pushing the gruesome images to the back of his mind, to be examined in the comforting light of day, Jensen allowed himself to get lost in the movie.

And if he jerked violently back into consciousness every once in a while, when his eyes did a little more than droop? Well, then, that was okay, because Eric was there to squeeze his shoulder and offer a quiet murmur of comfort, every time he did.

~*Jared*~

“You’re so insufferable sometimes, Jared! For the love of Mother Luna, would you just go visit your mate already?!”

Jared grinned cheekily from where he was, lounging across Megan’s bed. The youngest Padalecki was not nearly so amused by his antics as he was, judging from the hands she had crossed over her chest and the fierce scowl that decorated her face.

Sending her an exaggerated puppy eyes, he batted his eyelashes. “C’mon, baby sister, don’t you miss spending time with your big bro?”
The Alpha had no warning before a throw pillow was flying at his head.

“Yeesh!” he sniffed, catching the pillow and tucking it underneath his head. “As future Pack Alpha you’d think I’d get more respect around here.”

Megan glared at him, unamused. “Oh, I’ll show you respect, Jared Tristan Padalecki.”

“Cool it, pint-sized,” he chuckled, holding his hands palms-up in a gesture of non-violence. “What’s the big deal, anyway? It’s not like I came upon anything too interesting,” he shrugged, and in retrospect, that might have been the worst possible thing he could have said at the time.

He was treated to a fully-blown Attack of the Baby Sister. Her little fists came at him in a flurry, nailing him in the gut and shoulder with admitted force. From experience, he raised his arms to protect his head, caught between laughing and groaning as she tackled him.

“You annoying jerk!” she growled between hits, probably meaning to sound fearsome, but only serving to remind Jared of the tiny baby pup that used to try to mimic his and Jeff’s growls.

“Youngest brother it is thing one, but you read my diary! That’s an invasion of privacy, you overgrown pup!”

Before she could inadvertently do any actual damage, Jared caught his sister’s fists in one hand, holding up the other in front of himself so as to show her he was surrendering. “Okay, okay, I admit that I probably could have found a better use for my time.”

Huffing, she yanked back her arms and crossed them over her chest again, scowling at nothing in particular. “I’m telling Jensen on you.”

The Alpha took a moment to be amused at how his little sister’s threat had changed; just a few months ago, she would’ve tattled to their mother instead, but Megan and Jensen had established a very special and very unique kind of bond since they’d first met. Megs had become like the little sister Jen had always wanted, and in return, his mate was a lot of things to the younger girl; a tutor, when she needed help, a best friend, when she needed someone to talk to, and most recently, her biggest advocate, when she wanted someone to take her side. Jensen was like another big brother to Megan, without all the customary annoying that Jeff and Jared took constant pleasure indulging in.

Jared loved it, most of the time, because Megan was one of the most important people in his life, hands down. She was his baby sister. That she loved Jensen, at the crux of it, was even more imperative than his parents loving Jen. So yes, he was grateful for the fact that she’d gotten so close to his mate… but unfortunately, that also meant that her threat was a viable one.

Jensen was always very fair when it came to mediating arguments, which more often than not meant Jared couldn’t charm his way out of trouble.

“I’m sorry, Meg, come on, don’t tell Jensen,” he whined childishly. “He’ll yell at me,” he added petulantly, pouting back at his now-grinning sister.

“He should yell at you.”

“But I don’t want him to yell at me.”

“Then why’d you invade my privacy?”

“Because I was bored!”

Megan cracked first, laughing at the plaintive note in his tone. The Alpha beamed triumphantly,
hopping off the bed and heading to the door. “You laughed, I win!” he tossed over his shoulder as he made his grand escape.

Deciding that his sister had actually made a good suggestion at the beginning of their argument, Jared grabbed his keys and jumped into the Impala, turning it in the direction of Jen’s house. He was still riding the good mood from a night out with his beautiful mate and their friends, not to even mention how happy he was from everything being out in the open.

It had all worked out better than he could have ever hoped for. Jen had agreed to be his Beta, and had even agreed to turn. His dad was accepting of their relationship now, Adam was out of the picture, the Morgan pack hadn’t tried anything since their initial attack… things were relatively good. Jensen hadn’t even been having visions, lately, so aside from the fact that they needed to find a way to deal with that, everything else was pretty much calm.

He should’ve known better than to jinx that.

Pulling up in front of Jen’s place, the first thing he noticed was how absolutely still and quiet it was, an oddity for the fact that it was past noon. Sunday or not, Jen was always up early.

The second thing he noticed, was Jen’s foster father’s car in the driveway.

Jared hadn’t been face to face with the man since he found out about the abuse, and the Alpha wasn’t nearly so naïve as to think that such a coincidence wasn’t the direct work of his mate. Jensen knew how difficult it would be for Jared to control his natural reaction, and had executively decided to keep them away from each other for as long as the anger might still be fresh.

It was.

Drawing some modicum of calm from the knowledge that his Beta would be upset if Jared killed his adoptive father, the Alpha took measured breaths, walking down the pathway to the door at an entirely normal pace. Rapping his knuckles against the polished oak, he even managed not to tap his foot in anxious impatience while he waited.

“Jared,” the man greeted softly as he opened the door, glancing behind his shoulder at something before turning back to face Jared. “Nice of you to drop by, son, but Jen is asleep.”

Alarm bells rang shrilly in the Padalecki heir’s head, but he forced a smile on to his features nonetheless. “Hi, Sir. Are you sure? We were actually supposed to go out… may I check on him, anyway?”

Fuck, you better not have laid a single finger on him, you bastard…

Before Eric could say anything else, a rough, hoarse voice came from inside the house. “It’s okay, Dad, let him in. I’m up.”

“Okay, Sport?” Kripke asked, even as he opened the door wider to let Jared in. The Alpha stepped over the threshold and was met with the sight of his stunning mate lifting himself into a seated position from where he was sprawled over the couch, rubbing at his eyes tiredly.

Jensen nodded, the weariness in his eyes visible to Jared even from where he was still standing. “Fine, Dad. Give us a minute, okay?”

As if on cue, the phone began to ring, and Kripke nodded once to him with a smile before heading into the passageway. Jared wasted no time, going to sit next to his mate.
“Baby, what happened?” he asked softly, lifting one finger and tracing the bruises underneath Jensen’s eyes that spoke of a sleepless night. Without giving Jensen a chance to answer, he began to guess. “Another vision? A nightmare? Something with your father?”

The shorter boy leaned into his touch, shifting closer to rest his head in the crook between Jared’s neck and shoulder. The Alpha automatically wrapped both arms around him, pulling him in close and pressing a soft kiss to the nape of his neck. They stayed like that for a minute, Jensen appearing to be gathering either his wits or his nerve, but before anything else could be said, Eric appeared in the archway leading to the living room, knocking tentatively on the wall.

“Sorry, sport, it’s for you,” he said apologetically holding up the phone. “Some guy named Micky Ozera?”

###

Chapter End Notes

The plot thickens!

Hope y’all enjoyed! Please let me know!

Love always,

Jay <3
Okay, so I've spent the past 3 weeks in awe, and marveling at the fact that I have the most amazing, awesome, wonderful readers in the entire world.

Seriously. Each of you - everyone that commented, and everyone that's just reading quietly along - you guys are just the best. You've reminded me why I loved writing so much and I can't even express how grateful I am to each and every one of you.

From the bottom of my heart, THANK YOU!

Before I start crying! Here's an update! Managed to get it up much quicker this time ;-) and I hope y'all enjoy! It's a little bit of a filler, and I'm quite apprehensive about posting it... but look out for some important clues! Also, against my every initial intention, some smut managed to make its way into this chapter... hope I didn't totally suck at it! XD

PS - ATTENTION TO ALL HARRY POTTER FANS!! Off-topic a little here, but I promised my friend that I'd make a quick announcement; my girl's best friend, Mal, has started a HP RPG set during Cursed Child. She's starting up this site and it looks super cool, so go check her out! It's called The Twisted Timeline; if you're into HP, definitely give this site a lookie!

Onwards! Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*Jensen*~

Calling upon years of practice, Jensen hid the cacophony of feelings that erupted inside him behind one, perfectly innocent smile, taking the phone from his foster dad. Placing his hand over the mouthpiece, he looked up at Eric. “Dad, I think we’re out of flour, and I wanted to make a pie tonight. Do you mind?”

If Eric saw it for the diversion it was, he certainly didn’t say anything about it.

“No problem, Sport,” he nodded, grabbing his jacket and keys. “I’ll grab some ice-cream while I’m there, we’ll have it a la mode.”

The way they used to have it whenever Jody made pie. The reminder made a flash of guilt thrum through the green-eyed artist, but he pushed it resolutely away, aiming a smile at his dad as he raised the phone back to his ear.

“Mr. Ozera,” he greeted, his voice perfectly even and calm, since Eric was still by the door. “How can I help you?”

“You were only two years old when your daddy died.”
It took significantly more effort to keep his smile steady this time, but Jensen somehow managed the feat. Jared with his wolf hearing, however, exercised no such caution, and a slight growl rumbled low in his chest. Eric stopped with one hand on the doorknob, glancing around curiously, and Jen pinched his boyfriend sharply in the side to snap him out of it.

Smiling and waving innocently at Eric, Jensen forced his voice to remain level. “I’m aware, yes.”

“No, you don’t understand…” Ozera trailed off, sounding harried and torn. Thankfully, by this point, Eric was safely out of the door, and Jensen could drop the act.

“What exactly is it that I didn’t understand, Micky? The part where you insulted my family, or this part, where you’re assuming you have any right to speak on behalf of my father? Or maybe the part where you decided to turn your back on me?” Jensen knew he was being harsh, his voice icy and curt, but Ozera deserved nothing less. As far as Jensen was concerned, if anyone said a word against family, they were going to deal with him, and the pack was family. In every sense of the word.

Ozera sighed, a frustrated sound. “No, I’m not trying to speak on your dad’s behalf, Jensen, but… you were just this tiny little kid, and your dad was always convinced that you were going to be the one to inherit his genes, and, just…”

There was something in the older man’s tone that stopped Jensen from snarking back a reply. Ignoring his now-openly growling Alpha, the green-eyed boy tried to make sense of what was different. Micky’s voice, where it had first held some melancholy, some uncertainty… it now held determination. Resolution.

Obviously, the man had come to some sort of decision. And since he was phoning Jensen, who knew that Ozera was hardly the petty type, there had to be only one reasonable conclusion.

What had changed, that he was suddenly willing to help Jensen?

The thing about Jared knowing him as well as he did, was that the Alpha immediately picked up on it when Jensen found a puzzle, and also when he solved it. Now, sharp hazel eyes were narrowed in suspicion and trained on him, clear questions there.

One person at a time, babe.

“And what, Micky?” he asked shortly, his voice guarded. “You got it in your head that you were dishonoring his memory?”

“No!” A pregnant pause, and then… “Yes?” Ozera sighed and Jensen could imagine the man running a hand down his face. “I don’t know, Kid, I don’t, okay! I just… all I can think about, is how your parents would’ve kicked my ass for turning away their baby.”

Jensen picked up immediately on the choice of words that suggested Mikhail had known his mother as well, filing it away in the back of his mind for potential future use. Then, gathering his resolve, he squared his shoulders, despite the fact that Ozera couldn’t see him.

Speaking plaintively, Jensen stated, “They are my family as much as my blood was.” It was painfully obvious that he was speaking of the wolves now, and from the silence on the other end of the receiver, Micky knew it. “You can go to bed peacefully tonight, because I may have been my parents’ son, but I have also become my own person, and that person is someone who doesn’t turn away from the people they love.” Jensen stayed quiet a minute, allowing his words to sink in before adding, “They would’ve been proud of me for standing by the people I care about. Can you say the same?”
After an entire minute of silence from Micky, the green-eyed boy knew it was time to hang up.

Tossing the phone lightly to the opposite couch (and wishing he could’ve hurled it against the opposite wall, instead) Jensen shuddered a sigh, burying his face in his hands. It only hit him properly, now, but fuck, he was exhausted.

Before Jared had come by, he still hadn’t slept for more than a few minutes at a time, since last night. He’d managed to fool Eric, who had passed out himself just before 11am, into thinking that he had fallen asleep at the same time, but Jensen was far too haunted by the disturbing images and screams that were soldered into his memory from his trip into Nightmare Central.

Jared’s big, warm arm wrapped around his waist, and the smaller boy relaxed instinctively into the body next to him. “What happened between last night, and this afternoon, love?” Jared asked softly, seriously. “Because you were in much better shape when I left you home last night.”

He sighed inaudibly at the expected question. It was a completely natural reaction for Jared to have, but the problem was that Jensen knew the anger his answer would be met with. Again, it would be a normal reaction from the big Alpha, but it would be difficult for the artist’s pride to allow him to accept it as so.

Somehow, he felt an argument coming on.

~*Jared*~

“I took some extra strength sleeping tablets so I’d sleep through my nightmare.” At the blunt answer from his mate, Jared was briefly reminded of the adage about Band-Aids and ripping them off. Jensen, however, didn’t seem to be done. “Enough so that my body’s natural reaction to jolt me back awake was suppressed, and I could stay longer. Try to get more clues.”

Jared blinked, a wealth of emotions flashing through hazel green eyes. “You… you couldn’t wake up?” The Alpha was aghast at the implications of that. There was a reason people were forced awake from such night terrors, a medical reason, he was sure of it, and what could have happened as a result of Jensen’s reckless actions? Jared forced himself not to consider that question, because his mate was obviously still more or less okay, physically. Which brought about his next question… “And what did you… what did you see?”

At his future Beta’s flinch and haunted expression, Jared was told more than Jensen could have ever said with words.

Because it wasn’t about the actual images that were in his mate’s mind; it was about the sheer terror. It was about the feeling of helplessness and desperation and despair that stayed with Jensen for weeks after the first nightmare, now magnified by the accompanying graphical aid. It was about the horror Jensen had subjected himself to, something awful enough that his mate couldn’t close his fucking eyes with his body’s desperation to keep from being tormented by such a frightening reality.

And the Padalecki heir suddenly found himself inexplicably, helplessly angry at his mate’s insistence on being so careless with his own health and safety.

“God fucking damnit, Jensen!” he snapped out, against his better judgement, emotion propelling him to his feet. His eyes burned with emotion as he looked upon his beloved, exhausted, emotionally battered mate. “You know better than that! You promised me you wouldn’t pull shit like this if Ozera
didn’t work out! You promised me you wouldn’t run off half-cocked, well what exactly do you call this?!”

Green eyes flashed defiantly, despite the exhaustion ringing them. “I call this a calculated risk.”

“Bullshit,” Jared snorted mirthlessly. “You calculated that it would be bad for you! Do you want to suffer, is that it? Do you want to destroy yourself?”

“I want answers!” his mate shot back, standing now as well, partly eliminating Jared’s height advantage. “There is this pit in my stomach, Jared, because I know that something bad is coming, I fucking know it! But time is running out, and we are helpless to defend ourselves against it, because we don’t know a single Goddamn thing about what this is!”

“Then we figure it out together, Jensen, that’s what being a mate is about!” Jared hollered right back, spurred on by his fear. By his crippling fear that the universe always seemed to be asking him to sacrifice his beloved Beta for the welfare of his pack, and even more crippling, the fear that Jensen would be all too willing to do it. Because Jared loved his family and his extended family more than words could even possibly try to describe, but Jensen was his heart and his soul and the Alpha didn’t want to even think about losing him, not now, not fucking ever.

But it seemed like Jensen was driven by his own fears, because in a momentary lapse of that legendary control, the green-eyed future Beta finally revealed his demon. “This is the third chance I have been given at having a family, Jared. I’m not about to sit back, and lose y’all too! I ain’t prepared to do that, you can’t ask me to do that!”

And just as quickly as the storm had come, it passed, the only sound left in the room being each of their heavy breathing. As they looked at each other, Alpha and Beta deflated, wordlessly acknowledging the emotions in each other that were warping their judgement and their sense of rationality.

Slowly, Jared closed the gap between them, taking Jensen’s hands and enveloping them in both of his own before guiding them back to their seated positions on the couch.

“Jensen, baby,” he started softly, gently, “the Padalecki pack looks up to you. They count on you, and they depend on you, and they trust you, not because of your abilities, but because of who you are. What you are, to them. You are their Beta. The first thing you need to, and can do, to ensure their safety, is take care of yourself. Same goes for me! Do you think I’d give a damn about any information you managed to get, if you got hurt in the process? Do you honestly believe that anything would matter to me, besides you, if you were in danger?”

Jensen was quiet now, gaze fixed on their clasped hands, shoulders hunched inwards. “No,” he murmured after a moment, shaking his head slightly as he leaned forward to rest his forehead on Jared’s shoulder. “No, you’d make me a priority.”

“As would everyone else,” the Alpha agreed, dropping a chaste kiss on his mate’s downturned head. “We’re stronger ignorant, but with you, than we are informed, but without you.”

A long silence permeated the air following those soft, but firm words, spoken in a tone that brokered no argument. Jensen was still awake, he knew that from the harsh thumping of his mate’s heart that beat against his arm, but the future Beta seemed to be mulling over Jared’s words, ruminating over them in that critical way that Jared knew he had.

Personally, he hoped that Jensen would take his words to heart. He had meant every one of them, knew them as a truth after seeing his pack’s reactions and behavior to Jensen, that the green-eyed
beauty didn’t even seem to notice. The pack held Jensen in the same regard they held his mother; each one of them would be willing to stand beside him, just as they would stand behind Jared. If Jensen burnt himself out in the name of Intel…

It just wasn’t an option.

“I don’t intend on making this so hard on you, you know?”

Jensen’s comment was out of the blue, enough so that Jared simply blinked slowly in response until the future Beta elaborated with a tired smile.

“Keeping me safe,” he explained. “It’s not my intention to make that difficult for you. But the pro of information outweighed the con of having nightmares, at the time.”

Jared nodded slowly, acknowledging Jensen’s view before offering his own. “It isn’t just nightmares though, love. What you see… you can feel their pain, metaphysically and emotionally. If you can honestly tell me that half of what’s keeping you from sleep, isn’t pure anguish from witnessing that horrific scene and not being able to help? Then I’ll apologize immediately for everything I’ve just said, and I’ll never bring it up again.”

They lapsed into another silence, but this one had Jensen nodding in reluctant acquiescence against his shoulder. It wasn’t a promise to take it easier, or even an assurance that he would try to stop taking such risks with his safety… but it was an acknowledgment that Jensen understood where the Alpha was coming from. It was a confession that Jared had a valid point, and that the future Beta perhaps hadn’t taken the wisest course of action.

Jared expected that it was the best he would get from his stubborn lover.

~*Chad*~

Chad Michael Murray prided himself on his intuition.

As few had ever truly seen – Jared and Jensen among that elusive count – the blond alpha was shrewd and astute in most of his observations and assumptions. He could read people like a large-print book and though he projected a goofball, lovably playful part of himself, that didn’t mean that there wasn’t another, inherent part of him that could analyze a situation and see things from a third party perspective no matter how emotionally compromised he was.

It was this part of himself that made him the best candidate for Jared’s second-in-command, next to Jensen. When they were pups, his best friend had seen it, and when he arrived here, Jensen had too, and with their combined belief in him, Chad stopped being so afraid to channel his unique skill. He grew into the position that was picked for him since Jared first became his best friend, and whether they knew it or not, both the future Alpha and the future Beta played a huge part in how comfortable Chad now was with himself; with their constant encouragement and the way they both always took his opinions under serious consideration, the alpha was becoming more and more confident in his own assessments. He actively and productively participated in meets and discussions now, bold enough to assert himself and secure enough in the knowledge that his Alpha and Beta would back him.

All said, Chad loved those two like the brothers they were, to him, and so when Jared related his mate’s escapades to him, Kane, and Bush, the alpha had to fight against letting loose a string of
expletives.

Jensen was constantly trying to protect them all, more often than not at the risk of his own wellbeing. Chad understood that it was something inherent in the future Beta, but that didn’t mean he had to like it, and he was sure that sentiment was deeply echoed by their pack, most of all Jared and Kane.

“Jensen, you idiot…” Kane muttered, running an aggravated hand through his hair. “Is he awake?” he directed his demand at Jared, who still seemed to be weighted down and weary with concern for his mate. “Can I go see him?”

The question, if anything, made Jared tense a little more. “He can’t sleep,” the Alpha answered shortly, although his tone seemed to be directed at the situation more than Christian. “Whatever he saw when he was locked in that nightmare, it was horrific enough that he can’t close his eyes without being treated to a re-run.”

Chad flinched visibly at the knowledge. He vividly remembered how messed up Jensen had been the first time the nightmare had occurred, both from lack of sleep and from the awful things he had been witness to… except the first time, he had been able to wake himself up. What now? What had the future Beta forced himself to see, and how would it affect him this time?

“Give him some time,” the blond found himself advising, unwittingly echoing the request Jensen had made when he’d sent Jared ahead to relay the news to their friends. “His emotions are going to be frayed and his nerves, shot. He needs to recoup and he can’t do that in front of us.”

“He can do that in front of me!” Kane protested, but even so, begrudging acceptance darkened his eyes.

Jensen was strength personified. He went through the shredder on a more frequent basis than anyone Chad knew, and he still kept coming back stronger. Maybe the universe was playing one big, sick joke on the resilient artist, or maybe it was just some big test to see how much Jensen could take, but either way; he wasn’t going to back down. Their future Beta somehow always managed to find one more spark inside him that never let him back down. Even with his enduring strength, however, Jensen needed to be able to take a breather now and again, and Green Eyes felt it necessary to do that alone, or with Jared. He didn’t tend to show those moments to anyone else; not because he didn’t trust them, but because he needed to be able to focus on himself without worrying about everyone else.

Christian knew that he had a point, and as much as he didn’t want to acknowledge that, he was respecting it.

Glancing at Jared, the alpha quickly added, “That excludes you, Jay-Pad. You should probably go back and take care of him.”

The Alpha nodded grimly, his jaw tense with the multitude of emotions that were inevitably bombarding him. Chad searched his best friend’s hazel eyes, drawing on years of practice and trying to read the complications in those expressive orbs.

“There’s more, isn’t there?”

He phrased it as a question, but his voice made no illusion of the fact that he was making a statement. He knew as well as he knew his own name, that there was something else that was adding to the Alpha’s concerns.

To his credit, Jared didn’t try to deny it. “Ozera called Jensen, he wants to help all of a sudden. Says
his relationship with Sean Ackles was stronger than his hatred towards Were kind.”

Chad recognized the name of Jensen’s dead, biological father, nodding slowly to show his acknowledgment of the Padalecki heir’s words. Gears began to turn in his head and he already knew that Jared wasn’t going to like what he was about to say, but the blond alpha doggedly continued to form his observation in his head.

“Please tell me that Freckles told him to fuck off?” Chris asked, eyes narrowing at the reminder of the insolent man who’d dared to insult both their friends, and then cap it off by turning his back on the future Beta that they all loved so dearly, in so many different ways.

Chad expected an explosion for what he was about to say, but he said it anyways. “He has to go back.”

He wasn’t disappointed. Kane spluttered indignantly, unintelligible in his disbelief, and Jared simply levelled a dark glare on him, wordlessly demanding an explanation.

“Ozera is the only solid and somewhat reliable link we have to Jensen’s ancestry,” Chad reasoned, but his mutinous expression was telling of how much he hated having to be the voice of logic, when he was saying the things he was saying. “With him showing Green Eyes the ropes, we at least have some level of control when it comes to Jensen’s safety. Without him, the stunt with the nightmares is just the tip of the iceberg of what Jen will try in the name of keeping us all safe.”

“There’s an element of risk associated with him, but not nearly as high as the inevitable risk of having Jen-Ster try to develop his abilities alone,” Sophia surmised, understanding eyes locking on him as the beta spoke for the first time since Jared had gathered them at Chris’ place.

Chad nodded, a flicker of gratitude in his eyes. “Precisely.”

“Freckles won’t go for it,” Chris was shaking his head, a pensive look on his face. He had quietened down dramatically when faced with the case presented by Chad, and the long-haired alpha now actually looked dismayed, brow furrowed in consternation over the fact that their future Beta would have done exactly what Kane initially wished he had done. “He’s crazy protective of all of us, that’s not even mentioning Jared. No way will he accept help from someone who hates us.”

Even knowing that the other alpha was right, Chad began to shake his head. “Then we have to persuade him!” he insisted adamantly, blue eyes portraying his rare frustration. This entire situation was ten types of fucked up, because Jensen didn’t deserve this pain, and he shouldn’t have to jump through so many fucking hoops just because he was trying to keep them – keep his family – safe, it just wasn’t fair.

Jensen had weathered every storm life had thrown at him, but when was enough, enough?

The party of four was solemnly quiet, each wolf lost in thought about how to coerce their friend into doing something so out of character. Jared was especially broody, dark gaze trained outside the window, and it was focused on this, that made Chad miss it when another presence entered the room.

“Why not just ask him?”

~*Jared*~
It had been an emotional rollercoaster of a day.

The Alpha had woken up in a terrific mood, and though his happiness hadn’t decreased with his visit to his mate, there was a whole new level of stress added to his countenance with the additional concerns that were brought up by Jensen’s awful campout in his night terrors. Then came the call from Ozera, and that might’ve been okay, if not for his annoying second-in-command and his logical arguments.

Now, Jared was standing in front of his mate’s house again, with night having already fallen behind him, hoping against hope that simply asking Jensen would work out as well as they hoped. Granted, it wasn’t his plan, but it sounded a sight better than what he had been considering, which involved an intricate plot of secrecy and a lot of anonymous apology gifts that they would eventually hint at Jensen, came from Ozera.

A lot less complicated, too.

It had come from an unusual source, but Jared couldn’t discount how much sense it made, nor could he ignore the fact that his Beta would be livid if Jared deceived him in any way, shape or form. Armed with this reasoning, it had been quite easy for the young beta to convince him…

“Why not just ask him?”

Four heads whipped around to the archway that led into Chris’ living room, all of them caught off guard by the appearance of a young girl in jeans and a baggy sweatshirt. She couldn’t have been older than sixteen, with brown hair and eyes that bore a startling resemblance to…

Oh.

Tessa Bush.

A moment later, the Alpha’s suspicion was confirmed. “Tess, were you eavesdropping?” Sophia admonished, a frown creasing her forehead. “That’s not okay!”

“Well, we didn’t exactly keep our voices down,” Chad piped up, but Jared was more interested in hearing the younger girl elaborate on her thoughts, and he said so.

Tessa bowed her head at him in a show of respect. “Alpha. I apologize for my intrusion but I heard Jensen’s name and thought I might finally meet the kind and wonderful Beta to whom I now owe so much…” the little brunette shook her head slightly before continuing. “Though I only know him by name, and by what he’s done for me and my sister, your mate seems like a truly amazing person with a heart of gold, who would do anything for the people who he loves and cares about… like offering a family and money to his friend’s little sister when she thought she was all alone in the world,” the beta shrugged ruefully, one hand finding her still-flat stomach.

“He is exactly that type of person.” Jared nodded in agreement, a soft smile finding his face as he thought about his frustrating, amazing and beautiful future Beta. Jensen was still so blissfully aware of the impact he brought upon everyone who came into contact with him, because being so wonderful was just second nature to him. It triggered a reminder in the Alpha, of all the millions of reasons that he was so in love with that reckless, stubborn human.

Tessa smiled back, walking further into the room and seating herself next to Chad, obviously a little more comfortable now than she was a few minutes ago. “Tell him how you feel,” she suggested. “Explain your concerns, and explain that you don’t want him to get hurt. Ask him to do this for you
guys, and your peace of mind, and I get the feeling that he is the type of person who will give whatever is in his power to grant the request of someone he loves.”

Jared had to admit that the younger girl made total sense, and gave a pretty accurate profile of his loving mate. Looking around at his companions, he saw that Sophia was smiling in exasperation, Chris was nodding slowly, and while Chad wasn’t reacting, he didn’t look like he was about to protest the assertion and idea in any way.

Personally the Alpha thought it was their best shot. Manipulating Jensen was never something he wanted to do – he never wanted to break the green-eyed artist’s trust in him – and in the spirit of building on the foundation of their relationship, he thought it would be best to start trusting the future Beta more; trusting Jensen to listen to reason and try to take better care of himself.

Chris and Sophia were already voicing their agreement, and though Chad was silent, Jared decided that the general consensus was to listen to the petite younger Bush.

“Anyone want to volunteer to ask Jen?”

Unsurprisingly, it hadn’t even been a contest, who was going to be having this conversation with the fiercely independent future Beta. On the one hand, Jared was reluctant to have another tense conversation with his stubborn mate, but on the other hand, his Alpha was fiercely resistant to anyone else being privy to the softer, more vulnerable side to the love of his life.

It was a good call, too, especially when Jensen answered the door in nothing but a pair of sweats that hung dangerously low on his hips. Toned muscles accentuated the hard panes of his mate’s chest and back, and corded arms led up to lightly bulging biceps that made very clear the physical strength that the Beta rarely showed. The faint scar running along his abdomen did little to retract attention from the beginnings of a six pack; in fact, it only made Jen look tougher, sexier, more rugged.

Immediately, Jared’s mind clouded with lust, eyes becoming dark with the thought of anyone else seeing his mate in this state of undress.

“I looked through the peep-hole first.” Jensen’s amused voice interrupted Jared’s leering, as though he’d read his thoughts, and the Alpha ripped his gaze away from the exposed skin in time to see his mate roll his eyes. “I don’t open the door like this to anyone else, so you can go ahead and tone down the possessiveness.”

Jared tugged his Beta into his arms, claiming his mouth in a brutal, hungry kiss that left them both breathless. “Never,” he growled huskily, tightening his hold on his lover. There was no use in pretending that he would ever let go of, or lessen his possessiveness over the love of his life, and maybe Jensen had already accepted as much, because all he did was roll his eyes again and lean up to press a chaste kiss to the Padalecki heir’s jaw.

“My dad had some work emergency, I managed to convince him to leave by promising to call a friend over. You count as a friend, right?” Jensen asked, his grin somehow still managing to look impish even while his eyes were clouded with exhaustion.

And that right there? That was just another thing that made him love his mate so much, because he knew of no stronger person; no one else who could manage to quirk their lips into a smile against the toughest of opponents. Jensen always kept his fighting spirit, no matter what they were faced with; he never allowed anything to beat him. It made Jared a better Alpha, he knew… a better man.

Someday, he would find a way to tell his beautiful mate all that.
For now, he simply smiled. “Do I?” he asked back teasingly, leaning down to nip playfully at the nape of his lover’s neck. Jensen laughed softly, squirming until he was pressed against Jared in a loose embrace.

“’Course,” he mumbled, looping his arms around Jared’s neck and glancing up to smile tiredly at the Alpha. “You’re my best friend in the whole world, Jay.”

Playfulness turned easily into tenderness as Jared’s insides warmed with the statement. He didn’t doubt that – he and Jensen had become each other’s best friends, over and above being each other’s soul mates – but it was still all the better to hear the words coming from the green-eyed man’s mouth.

Grinning softly, Jared teased, “Does that make us friends with benefits?”

“Not if you ever want those benefits again, buddy.”

“Duly noted.”

Jared met his mate’s reproachful look with one of complete innocence and sincerity, and they both gave in at the same time, identical grins breaking over their faces as they laughed. The Alpha knew well enough was his Beta was doing – diffusing the tension from earlier with lighthearted banter and laughter, to make sure that they could discuss everything more rationally and calmly this time around – and he loved Jensen all the more for it. It meant that his mate was willing to talk things through again, willing to compromise more until they were both happy. It was a sign of how far they’d come, as individuals and as a couple, and Jared had the most fleeting vision of them taking over the pack, slipping into their roles like they were well-worn jeans, side by side and as confident in their skills together, as they were in their skills apart.

It made for a beautiful picture.

It also gave Jared a boost of confidence in his own agenda. “Love, I want to talk about Ozera.”

~*Jensen*~

Jensen had expected a talk. He’d even prepared himself for it, resigning himself to the admonishment he was going to face from his mate. What he hadn’t counted on, was that talk being about Micky. Honestly, he thought they’d be addressing their stalemate from earlier, regarding his admittedly short-sighted plan of taking sleeping pills.

What was there left to discuss about Mikhail Ozera? Was Jared still worried that Micky was going to expose the pack, or retaliate against them in some way? The possibility had crossed his mind ever so briefly – he was, after all, conditioned to JR’s way of thinking – but the man had obviously known about the existence of the Padalecki pack for years prior to their meeting. Or rather, reunion. Nevertheless, there was no reason for the man to only just now break his years of silence and inaction against the pack. Jensen certainly wasn’t worth that much.

Figuring Jared simply hadn’t thought of that, the green-eyed artist nodded. “Sure, Jay. What’s on your mind?”

For the second time in as many minutes, Jensen was shocked by his Alpha’s response.

“I think you should take him up on the offer to train with him.”
Green eyes blinked owlishly, assessing the Padalecki heir with thinly veiled suspicion. “Are you drunk?”

“Jen,” Jared whined, and if that wasn’t proof that his Alpha was sober and not possessed by a supernatural creature, Jensen didn’t know what was. “Be serious!”

For a brief moment, a grin came over his face, but then the words registered again in Jensen’s mind and he couldn’t help the bemused frown that took us residence on his tired features. “What the hell is going on, Jay? Have you conveniently forgotten the way Micky insulted our family? Or the fact that he hates you?”

“He insulted the pack, and he hates me,” Jared pointed out bluntly. “None of that was directed at, or has anything to do with you.”

The words caused an immediate sting, lashing through Jensen like a studded whip. The green-eyed artist shuttered his expression, taking an automatic step back. “You’re really going to say that to me? After everything?”

Jared had already started backtracking the moment the words left his mouth, but the damage was already done, and before he could help it, Jensen was making a mental note to be careful not to associate himself with the pack again. At least, not until he was turned.

“That’s not what I meant, baby, you know that.” Jared was shaking his head, the look of vehemence in his eyes becoming hard to deny. “I just meant that he loves you, and his fight isn’t with you.”

Jensen crossed his arms over his chest, mouth set in a hard line. “Are you telling me to turn my back on the people I care about, or are you telling me that I have no right to defend them because I’m not pack?”

“Neither,” Jared’s voice was placating, the Alpha probably sensing that any hint of frustration would start them on another fight before either of them could do anything about it. “This is coming out all wrong, can we just start again?” A pleading, tired expression was on the Padalecki heir’s face, and that more than anything served to soften Jensen. All of this was no easier on Jared than it was on him; maybe even more difficult considering how Jared hated to feel helpless when it came to Jensen’s well-being. The green-eyed future Beta had proven time and again, the sheer amount of control he always had, even in impossible situations, but Jared on the other hand… he was a rookie when it came to dealing with such issues.

So Jensen dropped his defensive stance; ran a hand through his cropped locks. “You can’t say shit like that to me,” he finally spoke, his voice slightly gruff. “You can’t ask me to be part of your family and then just conveniently decide when I am, and when I’m just another stranger.”

“Never.” The word left Jared’s mouth in something that was half a territorial growl, and half an agonized denial. Strong arms looped around his unresponsive body, long fingers brushing against the bare skin he’d yet to cover up. “You can never be a stranger, sweetheart, I never meant that at all.”

And Jensen knew that, he knew that Jared was in it for the long haul and knew that his Alpha had waited so long for Jensen to agree to be his Beta that nothing would stand in the way of that, but even more than he knew these things? Jensen knew that loyalty meant nothing if you didn’t stand by yourself and your people. He knew that family meant such loyalty through thick and thin, and he knew, intrinsically, that the spark Sherry Padalecki had spoken about? That Beta heart? It meant nothing if Jensen could allow anyone, for any reason, to disparage his pack.

Resting his forearms against the arms that Jared still hadn’t removed from his waist, Jensen sighed.
“Where is this coming from?” he asked softly, gently. His tone told Jared what he wasn’t outright saying; that it was okay, and they weren’t fighting, and Jensen was willing to listen. “Far as I could tell, you were fine with me blowing him off until now. Proud, even.”

“I was,” Jared admitted, a defeated slump to his shoulders. “I am, still. But it’s been brought to my attention that Ozera was our best option.”

Jensen pursed his lips, sensing more to what the Alpha was saying. Turning around, but keeping a firm grip on his boyfriend’s hand, the future Beta led them to the couch, sitting cross-legged there and facing Jared, an expectant look on his face. “Start at the beginning, Jay. Full story.”

~*Jared*~

Jensen was looking at him like a parent would, a guilty child. So, like any good kid, he tattled for all he was worth.

“It was all Chad’s fault with his logic and that perceptive shit he pulls out when nobody expects it!”

Jared’s voice was very manly and Alpha-like. Definitely not a petulant whine.

Apparently his mate didn’t get the memo, though, because an amused, indulgent little smile came over his face. “Of course it was, babe,” he nodded, with that patient tone he always used when he was humoring Jared. “And I’ll be sure to have words with him, too. Before I do, though, what was this perceptive shit he pulled out?”

Pouting at his lover did absolutely nothing to deter him, so Jared huffed slightly, resigning himself to telling the full story. Perhaps Jensen was finally starting to feel a little sorry for him, because his mate scooted closer suddenly, placing his hands in Jared’s upturned palms, where they rested on his lap. The Alpha smiled slightly, flipping them over and bringing their intertwined hands closer to himself.

“They were all really worried about you when I told them about your nightmares,” Jared started softly. A small sigh escaped Jensen at that, and Jared knew it wasn’t a sound of frustration, or upset, but exasperated fondness. For all of everything he’d ever done for them, his mate still didn’t expect such feelings to be reciprocated. Shaking his head slightly, Jared continued his story. “When I told them about Ozera, Chris was all for kicking him to the proverbial curb, but Chad mentioned that Ozera was our best shot. That if you went to him for help, we would all have at least some kind of control over this whole situation, because the alternative would be you constantly taking risks like you did yesterday, without any proof that you’ll be okay afterwards, leave alone whether it would pay off.”

Jensen was nodding slowly, which was a good start, because obviously, his logical side was making an appearance. “Swallow my pride and hope that Micky can teach me what I need to know, so that I don’t accidentally overdose myself or something,” he summarized succinctly. “I can see why Chad fucked everything up with his perceptive shit.”

“Yeah,” the Alpha snorted. He quickly sobered though, somewhat aided by the horrific image Jensen had provided him with, of his beautiful mate overdosed on pills. “I can’t handle the thought of anything happening to you, love,” he murmured roughly, hazel eyes imploring. “I wish I wasn’t asking you to do this, but I need you to let me be selfish. I need you to let me, just this once, put your health and your well-being above the pack.”
It wasn’t even that much; the pack wasn’t being affected by Ozera’s prejudices in any way, shape or form. Jared loved his Beta’s loyalty and devotion, but he was terrified that it might be the reason for Jensen inadvertently getting hurt. In some way, he understood that he would never really understand; he accepted that there were inherent parts of Jensen – as a person, and as his future Beta – that would prompt the green-eyed love of his life to do certain things that Jared might not necessarily agree with. Not agree with, because like it or not, Alpha or not, his heart and soul pointed due Jensen first and most of all. There was no part of the Padalecki heir that could stomach the idea of his amazing mate suffering in the name of loyalty to the pack.

Jensen made a tired little sound, resting his head on Jared’s chest, just above his heart. “I don’t like the idea of Micky thinking he can get away with insulting the pack, Jay. I won’t allow him to.”

“I know, love, I know,” the Alpha breathed, relishing in holding his whole world in his arms. “But I don’t like the idea of you exploring any more avenues that may or may not end up hurting you.”

Jensen shrugged slightly, in what Jared presumed to be a sign of concession. They were both quiet for a moment, lost in thought over the impasse they were at, accepting that each point was valid but unsure of what compromise could possibly be reached over it.

After long moments, Jared stated quietly. “We’re a team, baby.”

Sensing the change in his voice, in that way that Jensen only ever managed to, intense green eyes sought his out as the artist slowly straightened up. “I know we are.”

Nodding absently, Jared fixed his gaze on his lover. “I can’t think clearly with the threat of you getting hurt, hanging over my head. I’m asking you as your mate. Please. Call Ozera.”

As if only just now realizing it, Jensen’s expression morphed into a mixture of love and tenderness as he registered Jared’s fear; his plea, his desperation. A soft sound escaped from his lips as Jen squeezed his hands softly, his green eyes thoughtful now, almost calculating. After a long minute of consideration, Jared was rewarded for his patience with a small smile. The green-eyed artist strained upwards to press an open-mouthed kiss to the edge of the Alpha’s jaw, and that was as much confirmation as the words themselves, that came not long after.

“I’d do anything for you, Jay.”

The force of his relief made him almost dizzy, and definitely more than a little triumphant. The Alpha broke the easy vibe in the room by surging forward, claiming his mate’s lips in a dominating, bruising kiss; he licked into Jensen’s mouth, nipped at that sinfully full bottom lip, swallowed all the soft sounds and moans his lover made in response. Hands travelled with clear intent, smoothing the skin over Jensen’s hard torso before flicking at one dusky nipple.

The sound Jensen made at that, had Jared grinning wolfishly. Pun intended.

There were still things to talk about; still boundaries to set and conditions to follow, he was sure, but Jared couldn’t care about any of that in the moment. All that mattered to the Padalecki heir, was the feel of his stunning lover in his arms, against his lips, pushing along his body. So good, and right there, and together despite every fucking thing that had tried to push them apart. So help him, Jared wanted – needed – to just fucking take.

Urging the future Beta down without breaking their kiss, it wasn’t long before Jared was straddling his beautifully responsive mate, one hand rolling Jensen’s nipple between his fingers while the other painted possessive bruises along his hip and waist. For his part, Jensen was mewling helplessly, jerking his hips up to seek friction while his fingers tangled themselves in Jared’s hair and one hand...
raked down his back with just the right amount of pressure.

Groaning at the sensations, Jared relocated his mouth to his mate’s throat. “Fuck, you’re so fucking perfect, baby,” he growled as the future Beta bared his throat in submission. Drawing the soft flesh between his teeth, Jared worried the skin until he was sure it would bruise. “Taste so good.”

“Fucking tease,” Jensen grumbled breathlessly, throwing his head back as Jared ducked his head and blew softly over his mate’s neglected nipple, making it pebble. Never one to disappoint, Jared smirked inwardly as he flicked his tongue, just the slightest brush against the sensitive skin, only to blow softly over it again. His mate actually whined and the sound was so fucking gorgeous that Jared had to do it another time. And another. And another.

And another.

“Please, Jay,” Jensen begged mindlessly, his body strung and his hips jerking off their own accord now. Jared was careful not to lean back far enough that his lover could rut against him, determined to isolate every single sensation until Jen was going crazy with it.

For a small measure of reprieve, Jared dipped his head and tugged the nipple between his teeth, suckling hard and fast as a contrast to his previously teasing touches. His other hand, through all of this, never stopped working over Jensen’s other nipple, and the Alpha could only imagine how sensitive his mate was probably getting.

Jensen’s head hit the armrest with a soft thud as he moaned sexily, arching his back to all but offer the hard nubs to Jared. Maybe he’d gotten the gist of Jared’s intent, or maybe he was just distracted, but Jen had stopped jerking his hips up, so the Alpha rewarded his future Beta by brushing his open palm over the bulge tenting Jensen’s sweatpants.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, please…” Green eyes fell shut as Jen kept up his begging while still obediently keeping his hips pinned to the couch, heeding Jared’s unspoken orders as though he could read them from the Alpha’s mind. It was hot as fuck and if he wasn’t so busy devouring his mate’s tender nipples, Jared might’ve praised the future Beta. As it were, he simply continued to alternate between suckling, licking, biting and flicking.

After a few more minutes of torturous teasing, he lifted his head, admiring his work before sending his mate a smirk. “What do you want, baby?”

“You.” The reply was immediate, breathy. Green eyes looked down at him, blown almost black with desire and need. “I want you, Jay.”

“Mmm…” Jared hummed as he trailed open mouthed kisses down Jensen’s lean abdomen, stopping to swirl his tongue in and out of his mate’s belly button, to the beautiful sound of Jensen’s gasps. “I think that can be arranged.”

He’d intended, just a few minutes ago, to only get Jensen off; give his mate an explosive orgasm that would leave him pliant and satisfied, and hopefully then his beautiful Beta could try to get some sleep.

That plan went out of the window after Jensen’s first plea.

Jared was hard as nails, consumed by the thought of taking his mate, owning him, claiming him. Nothing mattered as much as being connected in the most intimate way imaginable, to the person that he loved more than life itself.

Yanking off the already-falling sweatpants, Jared groaned filthily when only bare skin was revealed.
“Commando?” His voice was rough and gravelly and he was practically blinded with lust at how undeniably sexy that was.

“Planned to beg you to fuck me even before we started talking,” Jensen shot back cheekily, and Jared almost lost any semblance of control. He clenched his jaw, lowering his head and resting his forehead against Jensen’s stomach for a second, in an attempt not to snap and bite Jensen then and there, claim him forever. A calloused hand fell over his mop of hair, Jensen running his fingers through the strands as if to help Jared come back into himself.

As soon as he did, he was kissing his way downwards again, one hand fumbling with the zipper of his own jeans as he did. Jared swiped his tongue across the head of Jensen’s cock when he reached it, done with the teasing now, groaning as the bitter taste of pre-come burst across his senses. All but ripping off his pants and boxers, the Alpha didn’t waste a moment before grinding down, slow and deliberate and dirty, their moans amalgamating into a carnal cacophony of sounds. Jared kept rutting against his mate, just the right side of rough, as he offered his fingers to Jensen, swearing under his breath when his lover submissively took both digits into his mouth, suckling them dirtily, getting Jared slick enough to finger him. As soon as he could, Jared retracted his hand and his fingers reached down, finding Jensen’s tight hole.

Rubbing over the puckered skin, Jared waited until Jensen was babbling mindlessly, practically incoherent with want, before plunging his middle finger in to the knuckle. His mate almost came off the couch, a hoarse scream caught in his throat as Jared began to move his finger, switching randomly between fucking the digit in and out of Jensen’s hole, and making circles inside him, pressing against the walls that were holding his finger in a vice.

“More, Jay, please, fuck…” Jensen whimpered, hips snapping as he suddenly shot his load, and if that wasn’t fucking hot – that Jensen could get off with nothing but a little nipple play and one finger – then Jared didn’t know what was.

The Alpha worked his finger in and out of Jensen’s hole, fucking him with shallow little thrusts until he got hard again. For his part, Jensen was moaning without inhibition, chasing Jared’s finger and making the prettiest noises in the back of his throat every time Jared pulled back without pushing in all the way. When the green-eyed artist was fully hard again, the Padalecki heir started finger-fucking him roughly, working a second digit in as he did.

As he began to scissor his fingers, he leaned down, mouthing at Jensen’s ear before speaking. “So fucking hot, baby, taking it practically dry… so fucking needy, aren’t you, Jen? You needy for me, sweetheart?”

“Yes, Jesus fuck, need it… need you…” Jensen was almost sobbing at this point and Jared knew he was at his peak with the teasing. Right now wasn’t about drawing it out; it was about reassurance, and giving Jensen the chance to lose control. It was about grounding him to reality, so that he could forget all about those fucking nightmares. Feel what was real to him.

Removing his fingers, Jared peppered tender kisses over Jensen’s face as he whined at the loss. “It’s okay, sweetheart, shh, I’ve got you,” he cooed, butting his nose against his Beta’s temple. “I’m here, I’m gonna take care of you.”

Through his litany of reassurances, Jared aligned his cock with Jensen’s slightly puff hole, not wasting any more time and easing himself in. He went as fast as he dared, Jensen relaxing easily for him, and after a few breaths and some choice words gasped out between them, he was balls-deep in his mate.

“You’re so tight, baby,” he growled, rocking his hips in small motions as he sought out Jensen’s
Jensen moaned as he curled his legs around Jared’s waist. “Deeper, Jay, faster… fuck, more, please…”

Obliging his mate’s sexy begging, Jared began to fuck him in earnest, pulling almost completely out before slamming back in, to the hilt. On one particular thrust, his mate all but screamed, arching wildly underneath him, and Jared’s eyes flashed with dark desire at having found Jensen’s sweet spot. He angled his thrusts specifically towards the bundle of nerves, relishing in the choked off cries that was punched out of Jensen’s mouth after every thrust.

“Right there, fuck Jay, please, don’t stop…”

“Yeah, Jen, that’s it, baby, so good for me, so good…”

With the level of intensity between them, it was no wonder that Jensen seemed to be reaching his height after only a dozen or two thrusts. Just before he could come, Jared leaned down and captured his lips in a filthy kiss, swallowing the broken cry that preceded Jensen’s orgasm. He kissed his mate through it, smothering each sound with his mouth. He kept fucking Jensen, chasing his own release, growling unintelligibly when his knot grew and his lover began to whimper with overstimulation. With Jensen’s hole practically milking his cock, Jared came after a few more thrusts, muffling his own shout by sinking his teeth into Jensen’s pec, not hard enough to draw blood, but definitely hard enough to mark.

They stayed like that for a moment, exchanging sloppy kisses while Jared rocked mindlessly, pushing the bounds of Jensen’s threshold as his knot kept rubbing the future Beta’s prostate.

“Too much,” came the eventual whine, Jensen hiding his face in Jared’s neck. “S’too much.”

The Alpha kissed down Jensen’s neck, unheeding of the words as he kept grinding. “One more, baby, give me one more,” he growled commandingly, reaching a hand down to rub the skin where they were joined. His nail caught on the rim of Jensen’s hole and he groaned at the weak cry it elicited. “You can do it, sweetheart, come on.”

He kept up his encouragement, smirking when Jensen got hard again, big green eyes shiny with tears that Jared instinctively knew wasn’t from pain, but from the overload of sensation. His mate was lifting his hips, now, to drive Jared further inside himself, desperate as he chased another orgasm.

Whether it was his rough voice, or his unrelenting rocking, or a combination of the two, Jared wasn’t sure, but whatever it was managed to pull another, albeit less messy release from the future Beta. For a solid few minutes, both males panted heavily, trying to catch their breath even as they pressed little kisses to whatever skin they could reach.

Finally, Jared shifted to spoon Jensen, their usual position for sleep, and when they were knotted together. His hand moved automatically, grabbing his shirt and not caring as he used it to clean Jensen off. The future Beta remained quiet and docile in his arms, obviously exhausted and wrung out but still fighting sleep.

Jared spared a moment to make a fervent wish that Eric Kripke hadn’t forgotten anything for his business trip, before curling himself around his mate. His arms were tight around Jensen’s waist and Jared’s shoulders were tucked around his, pulling him deep into the Alpha’s chest, as though Jared were afraid that someone was going to take his Beta away from him in his sleep.

The Padalecki heir pressed a lingering kiss to the sensitive spot behind Jensen’s ear.
“Sleep, love,” he breathed, his voice steady and soothing. “I’ve got you. I’m not going to let anything hurt you.” Jared removed his arm for a single second, to grab the blanket that his mate had obviously been using before. He quickly covered them up before snaking his arm back around his lover’s waist, locking it there with his other arm.

Jensen smiled faintly. “Gonna sing me a lullaby, too, Jay?”

The Alpha thought about snarking back a reply to that, but he knew that wasn’t what Jensen needed. So instead, he stayed quiet for a few moments, before suddenly beginning to speak.

“Shut your eyes, love, and shut ’em good and tight
I promise that everything will turn out alright.
The dark isn’t so scary with the morning light
And I’ll be right beside you, all through the night.”

Jensen had stayed perfectly still as he spoke. Jared didn’t try to sing, knowing that he couldn’t, but poetry? That was something he could do, and if Jensen needed him to make up a poem that sounded like a lullaby? Then that was what he was going to fucking do.

“Is there more?” Jensen breathed, all excited and happy, like he couldn’t believe Jared was doing this for him. The Alpha smiled at that, kissing the nape of his mate’s neck and wondering when Jen was going to realize there was nothing Jared wouldn’t do for him.

He licked his lips absently. “Do you want there to be?”

His mate nodded without hesitation and Jared laughed lightly, warmth spreading over his chest. He took a few moments to formulate another verse in his head, before speaking again, his voice low and smooth as whiskey.

“Unburden yourself from the pain of the past
Most disappointments, I assure you, fade fast
No use in dwelling on the things that don’t last
No use in fighting those eyes at half-mast.

So shut your eyes, love, and shut ’em good and tight.
I promise that everything will turn out alright.”

Jensen’s breathing began to slow, and by the time he said the last line, it had evened out entirely. It made Jared beam, almost, the realization that his poetry and his presence was enough to soothe his mate’s fears, and although he knew they were in for a tough time ahead, he was completely willing to come up with a hundred different lullabies if it meant Jensen felt safe and happy, and got some rest.

As the Alpha began to drift off, he began to think of other poem-lullabies he could write. It wasn’t something he usually wrote on, but for his beautiful Beta?

Jared would do anything, too.

~*Jensen*~

“Remember, Jay, he says one word about the pack, and I’m out.”
His warning was met with a dismissive hand and an indulgent smile, and Jensen scowled at his Alpha for not taking this as seriously as he was meant to be taking it. They’d had a deal after all…

The smallest gasp of surprise left his lips as green eyes flew open.

“Another nightmare?” Jared’s pained voice was right next to his ear, and Jensen shuddered a breath with the force of his emotions.

“No,” he whispered, amazed. “I slept fine.”

After the horrific things he’d seen, not to mention the sleepless night prior, Jensen hadn’t expected to sleep at all, and even after that marathon of fucking Jared had put him through, the future Beta was sure that a few minutes was all he was going to get. An hour, tops. He’d been trying to sleep the whole day, he knew the kinds of images his brain conjured as soon as he dropped his guard.

Except. Here he was, apparently well-rested.

Jared kissed the side of his neck. “I’m glad, baby. I mean, you only had about five hours, maybe six, but baby steps, right?”

“Jay…” Jensen shook his head, turning to face his Alpha and ignoring the throb in his ass that made itself known as he did so. “It’s been at least a month since I slept that long, uninterrupted. I feel… great!” The green-eyed artist laughed breathlessly, almost emotional at how much of a difference sleep had made for him. He slammed his lips on to Jared’s, kissing him hard. “Thank you for staying, Jay. You’re just… you’re fucking amazing, babe.”

There was no reasonable explanation, but to say that the presence of his Alpha was enough to soothe his subconscious; enough to make him feel so safe, that his brain didn’t attempt to keep him awake and on guard. The Padalecki heir had, in every sense of the way, kept his nightmares at bay.

Jared beamed at him, hazel eyes bright. “Really? Huh! Well, then that’s great, Jen! I’m a little worried that you’re so happy with that little sleep, but it’s still amazing to see that sparkle back in your eyes.”

Grinning at the sappiness of his Alpha, Jensen leaned his head forward to rest over Jared’s heart. Hearing his boyfriend’s heartbeat was something he loved to do, something he cherished ever since the incident at the warehouse when Jared had nearly died.

No matter what his Shaman abilities put him through, it would never cancel out the fact that those same abilities had saved the love of his life.

Speaking of which…

“I’ll phone Ozera after breakfast.”

Jared pulled back enough to look him in the eye, soft gratitude visible on those perfect features. “Thank you, baby. I love you so much.”

“Love you too, you big puppy,” Jensen rolled his eyes playfully, laughing as Jared nipped his jaw with a mock growl. It had been a long time since he’d woken up feeling so light and energized; he had a whole new appreciation for sleep and he was never going to doubt its magical properties again.
The mated couple messed around for a few minutes, play-fighting, relishing in the simple act of being together and pretending for a few moments that not everything was as complicated as they both well knew it was.

When eventually they settled back down, it was Jensen who brought up the subject of Ozera. “I have conditions for doing this, babe.”

“Wouldn’t dare expect otherwise, love,” the Alpha replied cheerfully, grinning down at him. “Name ‘em.”

Jensen smiled in amusement, sparing a moment to feel complete and utter fondness for his lover, before returning to the situation at hand. “First, you can’t object to whatever he puts me through. It’s his call to make, he’s done this before, and no matter what, I will see this through to its conclusion. Agreed?”

Jared looked dubious, but after a moment, he nodded his head unhappily.

“Also, I want you there with me.” At Jared’s narrow-eyed look of suspicion, he was quick to add, “Not for my protection. For his. If he says a word about the pack, I’m not sure that I won’t kick his ass.”

At that, Jared grinned wickedly. Needless to say, that condition was far better received.

Micky had been more than receptive when he’d called; something that surprised the future Beta, given that he’d all but iced the older man in his previous call. Maybe the guilt had weighed in on him, or maybe he actually cared about Jensen’s well-being, but whatever his motivation, the man had agreed to both conditions, and even promised to be civil with Jared if he had to.

Ozera had told him to come anytime, so of course Jensen wanted to go immediately; unsurprisingly, Jared agreed. Obviously his Alpha was pretty eager to get rid of the awful visions and nightmares; wanted them gone as much as Jensen himself did. Maybe the guilt had weighed in on him, or maybe he actually cared about Jensen’s well-being, but whatever his motivation, the man had agreed to both conditions, and even promised to be civil with Jared if he had to.

They were about ten minutes out, now, and Jensen hadn’t realized he was tense until Jared suddenly took his hand.

“Relax, baby,” he murmured soothingly, without taking his eyes off the road. “It’s going to be fine, and I’ll be there the whole time.”

Jensen let out a shaky exhale. “You promise?”

“I swear it.”

The future Beta nodded slowly, taking deep breaths to calm himself. This was what he’d wanted at the beginning, wasn’t it? It was now or never.

“Let’s do this.”

###
Chapter End Notes

Once again, thank you all so much for reading!

Jared's poem is an excerpt from one I wrote myself, so I hope y'all enjoyed that as well!!
Was quite nervous about this chapter, so I really hope I didn't disappoint!

Much love!
Wow. It has been a crazy long time since I've been here. It's not an excuse, but I've been dealing with some very tough personal things, and honestly, I wondered whether I was going to ever find the inspiration to return to this fic. But then I read some of the comments that were left in the past few months of my absence, and after the last one (yes, shoutout to you, TheHappyIntrovert) I realized that I had the support of some amazing readers, and that gave me the strength I needed to get back to this fic.

You guys are the legitimate best.

Hope this chapter is well received!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*Jensen*~

Jensen clenched his jaw intermittently, trying to push past the feeling of how wrong it was to be accepting help from someone who despised the people he cared about. His posture was rigid where he stood in front of Micky’s house, his features tight and his arms crossed over his chest, and it was only when Jared looped an arm around his waist and urged him forward, that the future Beta made a move towards the door.

Honestly, the things he did for his Alpha.

And this was just that, it was for Jared. Because all told, Jensen had a pretty fair estimate of his threshold, and he was pretty certain he could take a few more hits, but his lover seemed to want to avoid that, so instead Jensen was here. Selling his goddamn soul.

“You’re being overdramatic,” Jared rolled his eyes when Jensen voiced his thoughts. “Working with someone despite their prejudices about werewolves, does not equate to selling your soul. The enemy of our enemy is our friend, Jen.”

He shook his head stubbornly even as he continued to walk down the pathway towards the door.

“You’re being flawed.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“You’re talking like werewolves in general are our shared enemy, when in fact that is only Micky’s perceived enemy. Our enemy is my visions, and whatever I’m being warned about,” Jensen informed him primly. “Completely unrelated.”

Jared’s voice was way too reasonable as he answered back. “Wouldn’t you say that the visions are his enemy too, since he was helping your dad minimize them, and is about to attempt to help you do the same?”

“No,” Jensen denied resolutely, brow furrowing as he frowned. He didn’t have much a defense
against the logic, though, so he settled for an obstinate expression and graciously not punching his boyfriend in the bicep when the Alpha started to laugh.

Jared turned a knowing smirk on him. “You gonna knock, or should I?” he asked, flicking his head at the heavy oak door they’d reached.

“Your face should knock.”

“Well, that’s mature.”

“Your face is mature.”

“Are you even serious right now, Jen?”

“Your face is serious right now.”

“Are you done?” the Alpha asked after a moment, his tone saturated with a fond chuckle.

Jensen huffed. “Your face is done.” Grinning briefly at his lover, he nodded. “Okay, now I’m done.”

“Did that make you feel better?” the Padalecki heir asked in amusement, reaching an arm around Jensen’s waist to pull him in close. The future Beta went willingly, releasing a pent-up sigh of resignation as he did.

“A little,” he conceded, hand coming up to rest on Jared’s shoulder. “But not much.”

Jensen could tell, from their mating bond, that Jared understood what he felt. The Alpha was remorseful over the fact that he had to do this, but more than that, Jared was simply relieved about his safety being in more or less trustworthy hands, and that relief outweighed his guilt a few hundred times over.

Still, his Alpha nuzzled the side of his neck apologetically. “I wish there was another option.”

“I know,” Jensen nodded, steeling himself before reaching out and rapping his knuckles against the hard wood. “I know.”

They waited for a few moments in silence and Jared tried to remove his arm when they heard the approaching footsteps, but Jensen held resolutely on to him. He wasn’t about to allow his Alpha to restrain himself for the likes of Micky; and if Ozera wanted to make up for the way he had acted, he wouldn’t kick up a fuss about it either.

“I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t the greeting he expected, but no one had ever accused Jensen of being unable to keep his composure, because his icy expression barely flickered. Instead, he waited a beat before lifting a single, unimpressed eyebrow.

“Are you apologizing to me or my mate?” he asked coolly, deliberately using the word ‘mate’ instead of ‘boyfriend’, how he usually referred to Jared. The Alpha tensed slightly but didn’t say anything, likely warring between his selfish pride at Jensen for standing up for him, and his wariness at possibly pissing off their only remotely safe bet.

For his part, Micky just sighed lightly. Apparently, he knew enough of Jensen to have expected the retort, because his face only held acceptance and resignation.

“To the both of you,” he replied, and there was grudging sincerity present in his voice. “I shouldn’t
have let my own opinions get in the way of helping you, Jensen, and I shouldn’t have judged you prematurely, Padalecki.”

Without acknowledging the apology made to him, Jensen fixed the older man with a hard glare. “His name is Jared.”

Maybe he was being harsh (as his Alpha seemed to think) or maybe he was entirely justified (as was his own, humble opinion) but it all came down to the fact that Jensen was just really fucking sick of his family and loved ones making Jared jump through hoops to earn their approval. As far as he was concerned, his Alpha was a kind, smart, wonderful, loving, amazing person… anyone who didn’t see that, or still disparaged Jared, could go fuck themselves, because Jensen was through dealing with people who made his mate feel like he wasn’t good enough, or like they were doing something wrong by loving one another.

What was wrong with happiness? Why wasn’t that enough to be grateful for?

Unconsciously, Jensen took a step back. He didn’t care that Jared had drawn a promise from him, didn’t care that the alternative to controlling his visions, was dying from them. He refused to deal with another fight that left his mate feeling like he wasn’t the best thing that had ever happened to Jensen.

Which he was. Always. Jensen didn’t feel the need the prove that.

He would have gotten away, if not for the Jared-shaped obstruction. As it were, his boyfriend wound strong arms around his waist, anchoring him in position with a brief squeeze to his hip and a heartbreakingly pleading expression.

Honestly, the things he did for his Alpha.

“One thing,” he spoke in a hard voice, a clear warning as he glared mutinously at Micky. “Say one thing about Jared, or the pack, or anything like that, and I’m out. You’ll never see me again.”

Micky nodded, a cross between miserable and defeated. “Understood.”

~*Jared*~

He hadn’t expected this to be easy, but Jared also hadn’t expected to run into problems right from the off.

Honestly, he should have expected it, since Jensen had been so reluctant to do this to begin with, but as it were, he hadn’t, so the Alpha simply counted his blessings for managing to get his mate past the threshold of the Shaman’s house, and into the living room to sit down.

“My mate knew it or not, he had such a profound effect upon all those with whom he came into contact; at every age, apparently; and Jared didn’t want to think about the possibility that one day, there could come a time when he and his mate were not on the same side. It was a feeling he never wanted to experience, and one he didn’t envy Ozera
Jensen, evidently, didn’t share in his empathy, which was a bit of a role reversal since he was usually the more compassionate of the two of them.

The future Beta had his jaw set and his eyes hardened. “I think we can just get a move on, don’t you?”

“Normally, I’d say yes,” the Shaman sighed, already looking a little weary, “but you look as though you haven’t seen a decent night’s sleep in longer than you’re probably going to admit. Am I wrong?”

The stubborn silence from Jensen was apparently all the man needed for confirmation.

Cautiously, Jared offered his own voice to the conversation. “His exhaustion will hinder his abilities, even though it’s those abilities that caused the exhaustion? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, Jared,” the man answered, looking to him with what seemed like a hint of gratitude among the grim professionalism. “It’s a vicious cycle, but that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Jensen made an impatient little sound at the back of his throat, and in any other circumstance, Jared would have grinned at the subtle displeasure his mate was displaying at his amicability.

“So how am I meant to stop the cycle?” Jensen asked the question in a level voice, but there was still signs of defensiveness in the way he held his arms rigidly crossed in front of his chest, and the stance he had unconsciously taken up, as though braced for something. “Because nothing I’ve done since all this started has helped me control any of this.”

“That’s because you don’t know what you’re trying to control,” Ozera pointed out reasonably. “What’s keeping you up, kid? Are they visions, or dreams?”

Jared knew, even before Jensen raised an eyebrow, that Ozera was about to be the recipient of his mate’s sarcasm. To be fair to Jensen, the Shaman’s question did seem rather redundant at this juncture.

“I’d get a hell of a kick out of answering that if I knew what the difference between them was, Mick,” Jensen quipped, not unkindly, but not jokingly either. “I didn’t even know about any of this until recently, let’s work on the assumption that I know absolutely nothing.”

Ozera nodded a little sheepishly, but leaned forward in his chair, eyes glinting with interest and determination. “There had to have been some kind of trigger that jump-started your abilities, per se,” he explained, hands automatically gesturing as he spoke. “Since these abilities shouldn’t have manifested in you until much later, I’m going to assume it was something traumatic?”

“Jared was hurt and I healed him.” Jensen’s voice was short as he nodded, but Jared could feel the lingering grief and pain that his mate still held over that horrific day. He wanted to reach out for Jensen so badly, but the Alpha knew that such a gesture wouldn’t be appreciated while there was still defenses to be kept up.

Ozera, however, seemed disbelieving. “No, that can’t be right,” he shook his head, frowning slightly. “The bloodline is too diluted for you to have been able to heal anything right from the off. Maybe with practice, but as a trigger, without having had any guidance or…”

“I did have guidance,” the green-eyed future Beta interrupted, and Jared began to nod in confirmation, remembering Jensen telling him about Rosen, the ancestor that had taken the liberty of explaining the gist of his heritage to the Ackles.
Before Jensen could elaborate, Ozera was shaking his head, the glint returned to his eyes. “Then there had to have been something else, something before that, which called your ancestor to you,” the Shaman explained. “That would have been your trigger. Think well, Jensen, it could have been something as simple as straining to hear a voice, or catching sight of a flickering image and focusing upon it…”

Jared didn’t like to admit it, but he was completely in the dark about what could have triggered his mate’s latent abilities. As far as that terrible ordeal went, they had only spoken about the big reveals; how Jensen’s aunt had been the one who orchestrated the attack on Jensen in the packlands, and how she had been among those who had attacked Chris’ family. How the woman’s vendetta against her nephew had started at that time already, and how she had used her newly turned werewolf instincts to stalk Jensen his whole life; without harming him until now, apparently, which was something they still couldn’t explain aside from the realization that someone she’d loved, had apparently wanted Jensen alive. All Jared knew of that time, cropped up more questions than answers, now even more so because they had apparently missed the fact that something had happened to trigger Jensen’s abilities even before Jared’s near-death.

His mate, at least, seemed to be just as in the dark as Jared was.

“What does this even matter?” Jensen asked, a little bit of impatience wearing his level voice through. “Whatever triggered my abilities, what bearing does it have on learning to control these visions, or dreams, or whatever they are?”

It was a good question, as far as Jared was concerned, but the Alpha stayed quiet, realizing that he could gain a lot more in understanding his mate’s abilities if he just listened.

“It matters,” Ozera maintained soothingly. “It matters, because knowing your trigger will give me a fair indication of the amount of power that you possess. Because the bloodlines aren’t as pure as they used to be, our abilities vary based on two things; our strength to the Shamanic bloodline, and whether or not our ancestors deigned to filter their power to you, so to speak. It isn’t unheard of for the spirit guide who approaches a Shaman heir, after their first trigger, to filter some of their own abilities through to bloodline and into the heir, in order to strengthen their magic.”

Something flashed in Jensen’s eyes, taking away the hostility that had been hosted there previously and replacing it with thoughtfulness and curiosity. “I think Rosen might have done that,” he mused.

“Rosen?” That, more than the admission, seemed to catch Ozera’s attention. “He was your dad’s spirit guide as well. Surly old bastard, if your old man’s retelling was accurate.”

Jensen frowned, looking faintly reproachful. “Rosen’s great,” he defended the man lightly, and Jared had to facepalm inwardly. Would this man just keep insulting people that Jensen respected and cared for in some way? Because if he was, it was going to take a lot more than a miracle to keep his mate here.

Ozera winced almost imperceptibly, but it seemed like Jensen was trying as hard as he’d promised Jared he would, because the future Beta waved off any apologies with a dismissive hand.

“There was nothing else before I met Rosen,” Jensen insisted, lips pursed and eyes sharp as he thought back to that day. “The only person I saw and spoke to, outside of my captors, was Jared, and that was in a dream.”

The older man, gracious though he had been at the pardon of his earlier words, suddenly looked interested, holding a hand up to stop Jensen from speaking. “What kind of dream?”

Jared suddenly felt like he was missing something that should have been abundantly clear, because
the question had barely passed Ozera’s lips before Jensen’s eyes lightened with comprehension. Whether he was conscious of the motion or not, the future Beta leaned forward in his seat, abandoning his earlier coldness in favour of pure intrigue.

“That was the trigger, wasn’t it?” Jensen asked, but the glint in his eyes made it look like he knew the answer even before Ozera grinned, nodding.

Jared laid a palm fleetingly on his mate’s shoulder. “You did that thing where you figure everything out in your head while I’m stuck seven paces behind,” he informed Jensen with a wan smile. “Wanna fill me in, love?”

Instantly, his mate turned sheepish, reaching back to take his hand and squeeze it in silent apology. Jared responded with an easy grin, having become accustomed to the way his mate’s mind seemed to work at double the speed when he was faced with some puzzle or problem. A consequence, no doubt, of having to rely on his sharpness for many years as JR.

“That dream of mine, where you came to me and we figured out where they were holding me?” At his pause, Jared nodded to indicate he remembered, and Jensen continued. “We thought, at the time, that you had somehow reverse-engineered the mating bond and our telepathic connection, to enter my dream, because you were in wolf form. Beaver was right, though, that wasn’t possible. It wasn’t anything to do with our mating, but more to do with the dormant abilities I had that came awake because I was so close to mortal danger. I pulled you into my dream,” he finished, clarifying. “That was my trigger.”

Jared hummed, blinking as his own understanding set it. Honestly, he had forgotten that little mystery, chalking it up to good fortune and a miracle after Beaver had disproved their theory that it had come from the bond, but apparently Jensen wasn’t so quick to let go of an unsolved puzzle.

For his part, Ozera looked impressed. “Pulling someone into your dream… it’s not healing, but it still highly advanced stuff. If that was your trigger, then I’ve got to assume that your abilities far surpass any I expected. Surpass your dad’s and mine, even.” Anticipating the question before either of them could figure out a tactful way to ask it, the man elaborated. “My ancestors were Shamans alongside the Ackles’, but your line was always more powerful than mine,” Ozera directed that statement at Jensen with a small smile. “With that greater power, came a greater risk, as it was far more difficult to remain in control, and tethered to the mortal plane. Dating as far back as Rosen Ackles and my ancestor, Erim Ozera, my family helped yours control the powers and the spirits that seemed to favour the Ackles line. Over the generations, my power has become limited to simple spells, and the occasional communication. Your father could communicate far more vastly, and though he could heal, it was within a limited range of injury. I believe,” he concluded, eyes gleaming with anticipation, “that your abilities will extend far beyond what I thought I would experience in this lifetime.”

Silence descended upon them as they all ruminated on the impact of the things they had just learned. For his part, Jared was concerned; not only had Ozera rightfully pointed out that greater power meant greater risks, but there was also an additional factor to consider in that Jen’s abilities seemed to need feeding from his own energy. For all the times that the visions, or nightmares, or whatever had hit, they had been drawing from his mate’s energy, and with their frequency, Jensen had been getting more and more worn out as the weeks passed. How much of that energy force had been taken, and could they replenish it without Jensen losing it all over again?

And then, of course, there was the obvious bullet that had been dodged; if they had listened to their pride instead of Chad’s logic, and hadn’t returned to Ozera, how much longer could Jensen have survived before those dreams killed him?
Fuck, Jared didn’t even want to think about it.

~*Jensen*~

Talk about information overload.

Jensen, at this point, had even forgotten about his resolution to treat Micky like undesirable number one. He had so many questions and not a clue about where to start…

Why hadn’t Rosen mentioned any of this when they’d spoken? Granted, the crash course was more of a highlight reel to some of his more powerful abilities, than a history lesson, but he could have mentioned their family ties to the Ozeras.

Also, if those two families existed, didn’t it also stand to reason that there were others? And if so, what had happened to those families? There wasn’t any history to indicate some mass eradication of the Shaman lines, so despite the fact that they had diluted the bloodlines, there should theoretically be more like them around, shouldn’t there?

And, perhaps more of a current concern, how long was it going to take to get his answers? If he and Jared had been right in their deduction about the increasing frequency of the nightmare/visions, then time was running out for whatever he was supposed to be learning from it.

Who knew how dangerous that could be?

“The difference.” Jensen broke the silence, his voice slightly hoarse until he cleared his throat. “Let’s start with the difference between visions and dreams.”

Micky nodded obligingly, although his eyes narrowed slightly in concern, and Jensen knew that his father’s old friend could easily see the toll that the last few weeks, this past one in particular, had taken on him.

“The biggest difference is that visions are meant to be prophetic, whereas dreams are, for want of a better word, simply informative,” the older man started, sounding as though he had given this lecture before. Briefly, Jensen wondered whether his father had arrived with a similar problem, but the Ackles resigned himself quickly to the reality that there were some questions he didn’t need the answers to. Focusing on Micky again, he listened to the rest of the explanation. “Visions can occur in the dream state, but they occur more commonly during a waking state, and you tend to feel the events far more viscerally, as though they’re happening to you. Prophetic visions are usually to serve as a warning, whether it’s to you or someone close to you, that’s up to you to discern. Dreams, on the other hand, can be equally graphic or disturbing, but you won’t be able to feel any of the emotions firsthand, it will simply be as though you’re a bystander to someone else’s memory. These are usually from a spirit who is trying to tell you something about their past, but occasionally, it could be a warning from a spirit of a future event.”

Jensen nodded slowly, taking all of the information in and focusing on the key aspects so as not to feel overwhelmed. “I’m not sure how much that helps,” he finally spoke, a faint frown creasing his forehead. “I’ve experienced the same… scene, in both those ways,” he explained, uninspired by the way Micky’s expression turned grim at the words. “It started off as, what I assume were, visions, but they’ve been in my dreams as well.”

Before he could even finish speaking, Micky was up and pacing the small living room, his
expression deep in thought and more than a little concerned. Jensen shot his Alpha a look, knowing that Jared wouldn’t be taking anything good from the older man’s unease, and the Padalecki heir responded by curling a hand around Jensen’s, linking their fingers as if to draw calm from it.

“It doesn’t make sense.” Ozera eventually sat back down, rubbing a thoughtful hand over his beard. He looked like he was trying to solve a complicated math problem that had to be solved by solving ten other complicated math problems first. “Spirits are usually very carefully select in their method of communication for either of those, and it’s unheard of for the same sets of images to be conveyed in two different ways, it’s impossible for a vision to be the same thing as a memory. Unless… but that’s not possible, we’ve only ever speculated, so obviously, that can’t… and anyway, there’s nothing left to… no, definitely not…”

Jensen cleared his throat slightly, realizing that Micky had gone off on his own tangent without realizing that they were even still there. The older man came back to himself quickly, but he didn’t look any less worried.

“Is there any way to stop it?” That question, unsurprisingly, came from Jared, and Jensen had to wonder whether his Alpha knew how much tension resided in his hazel eyes at the inquiry. An hour ago, Jensen might have been against the idea of stopping the visions, but knowing that they took energy from him to manifest made him wonder just how much more energy he had to give. It didn’t seem like much, because he was fraying at the seams trying to hold it together with how little sleep he had been getting.

Not to mention the nightmares that wouldn’t stop after he forced himself to stay under with sleeping pills. Jared’s arms around him didn’t even work for longer than two or three hours anymore.

Ozera shook his head slightly, as if to clear it. “Of course;” he nodded, removing a chain from around his neck and sliding a plain, thick-banded silver ring off it. “This was your father’s,” he explained before holding it out to Jensen. “It’s imbued with the magic of his spirit animal and it’s meant to serve as a protection against any spirits who want to contact you, until you learn how to control and channel your spirit animal to do it without the aid of the ring. You have to keep it… where did you get that?”

Micky’s voice cut off abruptly as Jensen reached out to take the ring, sleeve lifting to reveal the leather band of his mother’s that Hank had returned to him. He never took it off, wearing it as religiously as the pendant on the chain that Jared had gifted him on their first real date.

“It was my mother’s.”

At the simple explanation, which was all Jensen could offer since he knew nothing of it, Ozera nodded slightly. “It was made for her by a mutual friend of mine and your dad’s,” he clarified, his voice sounding strangely far-off as he gazed upon the simple strap with its intricate tribal-esque designs. “It’s not meant for your use.” Micky snapped himself out of it, and if Jensen didn’t know any better, he would have said that the older man was flushing slightly behind his beard. “You should give it to Pada… to Jared.”

Since he wasn’t completely heartless, Jen took a moment to send his father’s friend a small smile, acknowledging the effort he was making and the way he caught himself and used the Alpha’s name. Redirecting his thoughts to the more curious ones he harbored, he let himself ask, even as he untied the bracelet. “Why?”

“It was made because your father was concerned about spirits using your mother’s energy or life force to make contact with him,” Micky expounded, to his credit saying nothing as Jensen removed the band. “Those symbols will protect someone of non-Shamanic descent from the powers of the
Without hesitation, Jensen reached for his mate’s arm, eager to put it on and feeling vaguely sick at
the notion that he had been putting Jared in danger unknowingly, every moment they had spent
cogether the past few weeks. When his Alpha hesitated, inching his arm back, Jensen raised his gaze,
questioning green eyes fixed on Jared’s hazel orbs.

Micky excused himself unobtrusively, and Jared waited for him to leave before offering a quiet, “It’s
the only thing of your birth mother’s that you have left.”

Jensen knew for a fact that he loved Jared. He hadn’t even known it was possible to love someone as
much as he loved his Alpha; and yet every single time that he looked into those hazel eyes, or felt
those warm and familiar arms lock around him, Jensen was lost to a wave of love and affection so
strong that he was sure he’d be able to power the world indefinitely with its power. Obviously, he
wasn’t showing any of this as well as he should have been, if Jared thought for one moment that the
minor sentimental value of the bracelet meant anything to him when compared with the potential of
his Alpha getting hurt.

“I lost them when I was two years old, Jay,” Jensen murmured, reaching out to brush his fingers
against Jared’s upturned palm. “I love them, I always will, but I’ve never needed anything but the
memory of them to do that. If there comes a choice between keeping you safe, and keeping some
material thing that I didn’t even know the significance of, I’m always going to choose the former.”

Closing the distance between them, Jared kissed him chastely, something indefinable lurking in his
eyes. He offered his hand in silent acquiescence, though, so Jensen simply secured the bracelet there
with nimble fingers.

As he tied the second knot, the symbols glowed unnaturally for a brief moment, something that
certainly hadn’t happened when he’d put it on his own wrist. For a horrifying second, Jensen thought
that Micky had misled them in some way, and that he was actually hurting Jared by putting the
mysterious bracelet on him, but his mistrust proved unfounded when the leather simply returned to
normal, resting against Jared’s wrist as though it had always been there.

He let out a breath that he hadn’t known he was holding, and grudgingly, dispensed with some of his
suspicion. Jensen still didn’t trust Micky, not for a long shot – vendettas, as he had learned, were
powerful things – but maybe he could lose some of the hostility.

For now.

~*Jared*~

_You mind explaining to me, Chris started, sounding amused, exactly why you thought it would be a
good idea to bribe that Osric kid to announce your relationship with Jensen over the PA system
during morning announcements today?_

If Jared could have glared, he would have, but as it were, he was on patrol with Kane, and his wolf
expressions were regrettably limited.

For some reason, Jensen had asked him to switch Chris and Chad’s patrols, despite the fact that it
would force them to leave for Ozera’s later than planned. He had fully intended on asking his mate
just what the switch had to do with – especially because Jensen and Chad had seemed to be plotting
an awful lot in the past two weeks – but he had gotten easily distracted by his mate’s pretty eyes, and those hands that knew how to play Jared like a finely tuned instrument, and those lips…

In retrospect, Jared had probably been played again, but at least the reward out of that had been significantly higher.

Without breaking stride as they paced the length of their borders, Jared shot an easy answer back at Jensen’s best friend and surrogate brother. *Jen was giving Connor-something-from-Art a few pointers for his portfolio and I’m still not convinced the kid knows we’re dating.* Jared refused to call the boy anything other than the first descriptor Chris had used for him, and while that exasperated Jensen, the Alpha got a certain kick out of it.

*And it had to be over the PA system because…*

Jared huffed slightly at the question, and the reminder of why he had done what he’d done. *Momoa also asked Jensen out again.*

The quarterback was really starting to get on his nerves, and as far as the Alpha was concerned, his course of action was certainly preferable to the instinctive reaction to put his fist in the pretty boy’s smug face. As soon as Jensen realized that too, Jared would be in the clear again, it was really just a matter of time.

He hoped.

Kane chuckled, but before Jared could snap at the alpha, he was speaking again. *Licorice.*

*What?*

*Licorice,* Chris repeated, turning to look at him with the wolfish approximation of a grin. *He has this bizarre fondness for the stuff. Take him some and he’ll probably let you off the hook.*

The Alpha grinned back, welcoming the surprised warmth that spread through his chest. He had never been able to break the wall that Chris had always had around himself, not even for the brief months that they’d lived in the same house. The other alpha had always been adamant about keeping his personal space and not getting involved with the pack unless it was direly necessary; he’d had all the makings of one becoming a lone wolf. Until Jensen.

Since meeting Jensen, Chris had started interacting a whole hell of a lot more. He participated in pack-related activities, he’d found his mate, he’d made a place for himself in the pack’s standings… Jared would go so far as to say that Chris would be right after Chad at his flank. The Padalecki heir had made more progress being his friend in the past few months, than he had over the past decade.

It was amazing, the effect that his mate had had.

*Thanks, Kane,* he replied after a moment. *I really wasn’t looking forward to being in the proverbial dog box.*

Chris barked out a laugh. *No problem, man. You didn’t hear it from me.*

A couple hours later, after the patrol and a quick stop at a candy store, Jared was on his way to his mate’s house, knowing that Jensen would be eager to get on the road. Since the first time Jensen had been over, Ozera had dutifully maintained his promise, showing Jared the same courtesies he afforded Jen, albeit slightly less warmly. That didn’t matter to the Alpha in the least, however, since he could witness firsthand the positive effects that came from the man’s help; his mate was sleeping much better, this time only awoken by the occasional nightmare of the normal variety, and since he
was sleeping better, the light was back in his emerald orbs. Jensen was back to being his usual self, breezing through most of his work and joking around with the pack and generally working his magic on everyone he came into contact with. He kept practicing the little things Ozera was teaching him, and recently, he was never without a book in his hands, since the older Shaman had inundated him with reading material that he had to get through before he could engage most of his senses and powers.

It was amazing what difference two weeks could make.

Armed with the licorice (although why anyone would like something practically made of dirt was beyond him) Jared made his way to the door, rapping his knuckles sharply against it. Jen’s foster father was here, as evidenced by the car in the driveway, and Jared had to wonder what excuse his mate had made with the bastard to leave the house.

(Jared didn’t see himself warming up to Kripke nearly as quickly as Jensen had.)

Aforementioned bastard opened the door, and despite his own resentment, Jared forced a polite smile over his face.

“Jared, go right on up, son,” the man invited him in hastily, gesturing sheepishly with the hand that was holding a phone, his palm over the receiver to indicate that he was in the middle of a call. “Jen’s studying in his room.”

Thankful that he didn’t have to make idle conversation, the Alpha nodded, keeping his strained smile, and headed towards the staircase. Halfway up, the man started talking again, and Jared thanked his wolf senses for the clarity of his hearing.

“I know it’s not ideal, but I really can’t make this one, Tripp,” he was saying in a low, but frustrated voice. Jared was immediately suspicious, but proven wrong at the man’s next words. “I’ve been taking too many out of town jobs, my kid’s been left alone for most of his senior year. He’s got college applications and interviews and finals all coming up… I need to be there for my son now.”

The Alpha couldn’t hear what the other guy – Tripp – responded with, but it didn’t really matter. Jared was far more focused on the fact that Kripke was evidently trying harder to be there for Jensen; not because the future Beta needed him, but because he wanted to be there for him anyway. It in no way excused the fact that he had been a miserable excuse for a human being in the past few years, but even Jared had to admit; it was a start. The man seemed to genuinely be trying to be the man he was before, and grudgingly, the Alpha let go of a tiny bit of his resentment.

Just a tiny bit.

When he reached his mate’s room, seeing the future Beta sprawled on his bed, books all around him and fast asleep, all of those negative feelings were gone, to be replaced with utter love and affection. Jensen had a book face down on his chest, and another opened not far away from the hand that was curled under his head a substitute pillow, so it was easy to see that he had fallen asleep in the middle of reading. It was good to see Jensen resting and finally looking peaceful as he was, and Jared was loathe to wake him up, but he knew that his mate was enjoying the exploration of his Shamanic roots. No doubt he wouldn’t want to miss the session with Ozera.

Jared briefly considered being a good boyfriend and mate, and waking Jensen up with a gentle kiss, or a hand threading through his hair. He quickly discarded that idea, however, when he spotted the pillow laying harmlessly on Jensen’s bed.

Gingerly picking it up and grinning when Jensen hardly stirred, he gripped one edge of the pillow
and prepared to bring it down on Jensen’s stomach, a place where he knew his mate was vulnerable. Just before he could make contact, there was a flurry of motion, and the next thing Jared was aware of, he was being nailed in the face by the same pillow he’d tried to attack Jensen with.

Spluttering, he aimed a gobsmacked look at his mate, who was smirking smugly.

“You really shouldn’t try to attack someone who has street cred like I do, babe,” Jensen informed him, and if it wasn’t for the roughened voice, Jared would have doubted that the boy had been sleeping in the first place.

Reluctantly, the Alpha laughed, before tackling his mate gently on to the bed. This time, he knew that Jensen allowed the motion to happen, so he rewarded his lover with a kiss on the nose. “You’re going to be lethal when you have wolf senses over and above JR senses,” Jared commented with a grin, propping his weight on his forearms so that he didn’t crush Jensen’s slighter form. The future Beta simply smiled, leaning up to kiss him, slow and languid, by way of response.

Jensen hummed underneath him when Jared broke the kiss off to relocate his lips to his mate’s neck. Grinning against the delicate skin that had been instinctively bared to him, the Alpha took pleasure in suckling a bruise high on Jensen’s throat, so it couldn’t be covered up, nipping lightly before pulling back to admire his work as the blood pooled on fair skin.

“Jared…” his name left his mate’s mouth in a gritted groan as soon as Jared raked his teeth over Jensen’s hickey. “Much as I’m enjoying where this is headed, we’re never going to get to Micky’s if you keep it up. Plus, my dad’s right downstairs.”

Talk about a mood-killer times two.

The Alpha ceased his motions almost instantly, pushing himself to a standing position and offering a hand to his mate, who grinned as he accepted it. As if in consolation, Jensen kissed him lightly one more time before going off in search of his sneakers, while Jared gathered the books still strewn across the bed.

“Hey, love,” Jared started, waiting for Jensen to shoot him a glance before continuing, “what’s the deal with you and Chad? There something I’m missing, or…”

The shrill ringing of Jared’s phone interrupted the question, making the Alpha bite back a sigh. The ringtone was one specifically programmed for his father’s number, and though it wasn’t unheard of for Gerald Padalecki to call with the sole purpose of checking in on his son, it was still more than likely that there was a problem of some kind that needed Jared’s presence.

He answered it quickly, balancing the phone between his shoulder and ear as he kept gathering books. “Hey, Dad. What’s up?”

“Hey, son. I know you and Jensen have that study session today, but do you think you two could postpone it?” Gerald asked, sounding harried. Jared frowned – his father never usually sounded that way – and absently, the Alpha stopped his motions, senses alerted to his predecessor.

“I don’t know, Dad, I’ll check with Jen,” Jared replied hesitantly, barely remembering the excuse they’d given everyone else, since they wanted Ozera off the pack’s radar. “Is everything okay?”

Hearing his side of the conversation, Jensen stuck his head around the wardrobe door, watching him with thinly veiled concern as he tugged his shoes on.

On the opposite end of the line, the current Alpha blew a breath that sounded equal parts stressed and defensive. “There’s been some talk about Morgan’s pack hitting our South-East border today,”
Gerald answered, and his tone of voice meant that it was all-business.

“South-East…” Jared mumbled, backtracking in his mind and figuring out where his father was talking about. “But that’s the furthest border from our packlands, why would Morgan hit us from there?” he asked, some instinct deep inside him rearing its head. Tactically, it was a really stupid move, and there was no part of JD Morgan that wasted his time on useless maneuvers.

His words seemed to be enough to trigger Jensen’s concern, because in the next minute, his mate was grim-faced and standing next to him, indicating that he should put the phone on speaker. Jared complied easily enough, wanting to know whether Jen shared in the misgivings that the Alpha was having right from the off.

Gerald, however, didn’t. “It doesn’t matter why, Jared,” he spoke testily, and though he knew that it was simply out of stress, the Alpha in him still had to suppress an instinctive growl. “We are sworn to protect our pack, and that means checking out every single lead that we get on any possible invasive attack.”

Before he could snap something back, Jensen’s hand was curving around his hip, a reassuring squeeze given to calm him down. Jared could easily read those green eyes, hearing what Jensen was saying without needing words; that he needed to help check the threat out.

“I’ll be right there,” Jared replied shortly, cutting off the call before he said anything that would cause another fight between him and his father, which was something they didn’t have time for.

“I’ll come with you,” Jensen offered before he could say anything, pulling away and reaching for his cell, presumably to call Ozera. “I just…”

Jared cut his mate off with a soothing hand over the back of his neck. “Jen, you don’t think this is an attack any more than I do.”

The Alpha spoke without thinking, but as soon as the words left his mouth, he knew they were true. If there were any real threat of danger, his mate would be looking worried instead of calculating; just as Jared’s gut would have been clenching instead of simmering with the force of his distrust.

“I don’t,” Jensen admitted lowly, confirming his suspicions after a loaded moment. “There’s nothing to be gained from attacking part of the packlands that won’t affect the pack in the least, not to mention that they can’t have rallied their forces again so quickly, after the blow they faced last time. It doesn’t make any sense, and Morgan hasn’t survived as long as he has by not making sense. That being said,” he added, reaching out to frame Jared’s face with a hand, “your father’s right. We need to be there.” Jared started to protest, only to be shut up by a chaste kiss from his mate. “I know you want to argue and be right,” Jensen smiled faintly, “but I don’t think being Alpha is only about being right. It’s also about making the pack feel safe, and about checking every threat out to ensure that. It’s about being there and presenting a strong front, so that they know they can count on you.”

Part of Jared wanted to be annoyed, since he knew that his mate was right on all counts, but he couldn’t help being amazed instead. When was it, exactly, that his beautiful Beta had gotten a better hold on the pack politics than him?

His father had said it before, but the strength of a Beta never failed to astound Jared.

Wrapping his arms around his mate, he rewarded Jensen’s logic with a sound kiss. “I don’t care when you turn, you’re more of a Beta than anyone could dream of being.” Jensen beamed up at him from underneath those ridiculously long lashes, making Jared smile involuntarily. In a tactical maneuver of his own, the Alpha chose that moment to add, “I don’t think you should cancel with
Ozera, though.”

Immediately, Jensen went to protest, but Jared was quick to try to talk him down. “It’s only going to be a few of us checking it out, anyway, and you said it yourself, it’s probably nothing,” he reasoned, thumbing Jensen’s jaw. “I’ll have Megan keep you on standby from the house, but for now, these sessions are more important than what’s more than likely a false alarm.”

“What if it’s not?” the future Beta asked obstinately, but those green eyes were clearly filled with apprehension at the thought.

Jared shook his head, butting his nose lightly against Jensen’s temple. “You’re the one who taught me to listen to my gut,” he replied instead. “It’s telling me that this is nothing but a red herring. You have to trust me, okay?” He hesitated a moment before leaning his forehead against his mate’s. “Please trust me.”

For a minute that seemed to span a century, neither of them spoke. Jared knew how difficult this was, asking his mate to stay behind, but truth told, Jared had full faith in his instinct that this was nothing of real concern. Something else inside him felt uneasy; like he should be thinking of something he hadn’t considered; but for as long as Jensen was safe at Ozera’s, he could think clearly.

“You promise you’ll keep me updated?” Jensen asked finally, looking worried, but also resigned now.

Jared nodded emphatically. “Every step of the way.”

Nodding shortly, his mate stepped out of his arms and began gathering his books himself, looking perturbed. The Alpha sighed to himself, realizing that there was a bone of tension between him and Jensen all of a sudden, brought on no doubt by his request. He wanted to fix it, clear the air so to speak, but he knew that there stood a risk of him capitulating and taking Jensen along anyway if they talked about it. Which he couldn’t allow himself to do. These sessions were helping Jensen too much, and then besides, Jensen would just be manning the fort if he came along anyway.

“Take the Impala,” he offered after a moment of silence. It was a weak olive branch, but it was the least he could do, at that moment. “I’ll call Chad or Chris, ask them to pick me up. At least that way you don’t have to worry about filling gas.”

The future Beta straightened, looking ready to decline, but maybe Jared looked as pleading as he felt, because Jensen softened slightly. After a moment, he nodded his assent. “Thanks,” he said simply, palming the keys that Jared tossed at him. “Be careful, okay?” he added softly as they left the room and descended the stairs together.

“I always am. You too, okay?” the Alpha replied solemnly, fleetingly brushing his fingers against his mate’s neck. Unsurprisingly, he didn’t feel better, even when Jensen nodded in affirmation. Something felt wrong about letting Jensen go alone, but as Chad’s distinctive horn honked from outside, the choice was made for them.

Jared just hoped the misgivings he had was only because of this odd threat.

~*Jensen*~

His uneasiness with this whole situation didn’t ease, not even when he reached Micky’s place
Trying to convince himself that it was just his natural mistrust, Jensen made his way into the house. “Micky?” he called out, leaving his books on the table in the dining room before searching out his mentor. “Hey, are you… Christ, what happened?” Jensen asked on a low gasp as he caught sight of Ozera sprawled on the couch, a wet cloth held to the back of his neck and the man himself looking sweaty and shaky. Jensen made his way to Micky with quick stride, concern making him reach out and take hold of the cloth instead, since it looked like it was taking more effort than the man had to keep it there.

“Nothing,” Ozera denied wearily, waving a tired hand at him. “Nothing happened, kid, I’m okay. Just… exhausted,” he claimed with a cavernous sigh, leaning his head back, safe in the knowledge that Jensen had the cloth in place. “Once a month, there are some spells that I need to strengthen, and since I’m not as powerful as the Shaman who put it there was, it takes a lot more out of me.”

Slowly, Jensen’s heart found its normal rhythm again. “What spells?” he asked curiously, eyeing his mentor and wondering what the hell had the power to turn him into a veritable rag doll.

Micky studied him for a moment, eyes tired, but sharp as they assessed him. Jensen wondered what he was looking for, but instead of asking, he remained quiet, keeping his green gaze calm and steady.

“Do you ever wonder about the history between Shamans and wolves?” Ozera asked, instead of answering, appearing to have found whatever it was he had been looking for.

Jensen nodded slowly, humoring the man’s train of thought. “Yes. I just didn’t know whether it was a question I wanted answered in front of my mate.”

A pulse of something that looking an awful lot like regret, passed over Micky’s expression.

“Jared isn’t here, now.”

“No,” Jensen agreed mildly. “No, he isn’t.”

Ozera nodded, still looking wrecked, but in full possession of his wits. “Shamans had a long-standing, peaceful relationship with the lupine faction, pre-dating even further back than Rosen Ackles and Erim Ozera,” he started, reaching up to take hold of the cloth again with a grateful pat to Jensen’s forearm. “My grudge is entirely my own, I’m afraid. At a time when the wolves were most vulnerable to human kind’s suspicions, Shamans agreed to help shield the wolves with a spell, one that gave them the ability to shift at will rather than fall prey to the moon’s calling once a month.”

The words sparked a memory in his brain, and Jensen nodded to show that he had heard that part of the story, a long time ago from a scorned Katherine Tally.

“Even through the transitions that wolves made from their pack formations,” Micky continued, “there continued to be a trend of goodwill between the two beings. There was never a mated pair in recorded history, like you and Pada—... Jared,” he amended, not for the first time, “but there did exist relationships and marriages between them. Contrary to popular belief, wolves don’t need to find their true mate to undertake the Mating and Turning Bites. One such case, more recently, gave rise to the spell work I had to strengthen today,” he added. “This isn’t a widely known fact, but do you know of the truce that exists between the Padalecki pack and the Morgan pack?”

Jensen barely refrained from jerking in surprise, at the fact that Micky seemed to know of the truce. Although, he supposed, it shouldn’t have been that much of a surprise considering that the two kinds had apparently been friendly since the dawn of time. Not that anyone seemed to mention it…
whether it was because of some unspoken agreement, or because there were so few of them left, Jensen didn’t know.

Jensen flicked his tongue over his bottom lip, which felt chapped and dry. “I know about it,” was all he offered in response.

“The treaty remains in effect because of a binding spell that was placed upon it,” he revealed. “When talk of a truce first came up between Gerald Padalecki and Jack Morgan, trust was difficult to come by, not surprising since the two packs had been fighting over land a long while. The binding spell was a way to ensure that both parties couldn’t break the treaty without the threat of a magical backlash in return. Nobody else knows about it,” Ozera added, anticipating Jensen’s next question. His expression was grave, pensive almost. “Only the Alphas, Betas, and the Shamans who had a hand in the spell, myself included. For the safety of the Shamans and the integrity of the Alpha’s vows, no one else was informed of the bind.”

Jensen’s mind was racing with the new information. Was this why Gerald Padalecki so often conducted treaty meetings, even knowing that they were, in Jared’s words, useless? Was this why the man hadn’t been as worried as Jensen and Jared had been after the first near attack?

But… why had that attack happened in the first place, if the bind was true? Did Jeff Morgan not know of the spell that had been cast after his brother’s agreement to the treaty, or did he simply not care? Or not believe?

“I thought this would make you feel better?” Ozera mused, casting a worried look at him as Jensen snapped back into attention. “Knowing that there was something stopping a pack war?”

Standing up and resisting the urge to start pacing, the future Beta shoved his hand through his hair. “Is there any way to get around the treaty?” he asked, not bothering to disguise his worry.

Micky thought about it for a few moments, and the fact that his mentor seemed to be considering many possibilities, actually made Jensen feel better. It meant that Ozera wasn’t working on the assumption that the treaty’s binding was failsafe.

“No, there’s no way around it,” he confirmed finally, shaking his head. “And nobody knows all the identities of the Shamans involved either, so it’s a pretty safe precaution.”

Jensen nodded slowly, but for some reason, he couldn’t take as much comfort from that as he hoped he might. There was just something lurking in the back of his mind that he couldn’t quite get a hold on, and he knew if he would, then there would be a glaring piece of the puzzle staring him in the eye that he hadn’t noticed yet.

Glancing over at his mentor, he felt his concern filter back. “You need to rest, Micky,” he told the older man bluntly, but not unkindly. “You look wrecked. We can pick things up tomorrow instead, okay?”

Ozera made an aborted motion, as if he were going to argue before wisely deciding against it. After making certain that the man didn’t need help getting upstairs to his room, Jensen turned the Impala back in the direction of home, using the long drive to ruminate on everything he had just learned.

Most intriguing, perhaps, was the knowledge that Shamanic magic existed between the packs in the form of the treaty. Since Micky hadn’t expressly forbidden it, Jensen fully intended on letting Jared know that the failsafe was in place; as far as he was concerned, Jared was his Alpha, as well as the future pack Alpha, and as such, he deserved to know that such a measure existed. He had spent a lot of time worrying over the stability of the treaty, Jensen knew, and this might serve to ease that
concern in the slightest.

Another interesting little tidbit was the fact that there was more than one Shaman who perpetuated the magic. That meant, surely, that there were others in reasonable proximity, who had to help uphold the magic of the bind. The question was, why hadn’t their identities been revealed?

Mulling all those thoughts over in his mind, Jensen almost missed it when his cellphone started ringing. Fumbling to connect his headset, it took him a minute, so when he answered, his voice was a little breathless.

“Jen?” Jared’s questioning voice sounded slightly alarmed. “Everything okay, baby?”

Though he had been tense with his Alpha earlier, that had been mostly due to the fact that he hated feeling so woefully out of place and unprepared. Now that he was headed back, and now that he knew the treaty had a built in safeguard, he felt a lot better, so his voice was warm as he answered his lover.

“All good, Jay,” he confirmed, easing the Impala around a turn. “I’m headed back home. Micky wasn’t really up for a session, he was kind of worn out.”

Jensen knew that the Alpha was probably curious, but to his credit, Jared didn’t bombard him with questions. “Okay, well, the border threat turned up bust,” he relayed, and Jensen could hear the sound of a door being slammed in the background. “How far away are you?”

“Only about ten minutes out,” he replied, realizing with a start that his thoughts had consumed him for a longer time than he had been aware. “I’ll meet you at my place?”

“See you in ten, love,” Jared confirmed, sounding hesitant, and Jensen didn’t need to see his Alpha to know what was going through his mind.

Before the Padalecki heir could speak, Jensen offered a quiet, “Love you, babe.” It was the best he could offer in that moment; the quickest way to assure Jared that they were fine, and that Jensen wasn’t mad, or upset, or hurt about the way things had panned out.

Jared, as he always did, got it.

“More than the moon and the stars?” he asked playfully, his voice lower with affection and relief.

A smile found Jensen’s face at the words they had adopted as theirs. “Forever and always, Jay.”

Hanging up and rolling his eyes, with no small measure of fondness, at his sappy boyfriend, Jensen actually focused on the road and his driving, and true to form, reached his house well within his ten minute estimate. His head was still swimming with all the new information he had to process, and as he locked the car and headed down the walkway, he blamed that, in combination with some residual fatigue, for the reason he didn’t register a threat until a blindingly painful force smashed against his back.

Jensen fell to the ground with a muted grunt of pain. Though he had been caught off guard, his old training kicked in quickly, and the JR part of him forced himself into a roll, using the momentum to his advantage.

He raised his arms instinctively to cover his face as he rolled on to his knees, back throbbing intensely from the cheap shot. His mind registered two things – that his attacker was none other than his fucking ex-boyfriend, Adam, and that the cowardly asshole had brought a baseball bat with him this time – before another swing was being taken at him. Jensen grabbed the end of the bat that was
aiming for his head and yanked hard, holding fast despite the pain that resonated across his palm at the impact. Unfortunately, he couldn’t get to his feet quick enough, and Adam used the height disadvantage to knee him in the side of his head.

Jensen cried out in pain, his vision blinding slightly with the force of the impact. His ears were ringing, but he still didn’t let go of the bat, knowing that if he did, there was a chance that he could kiss his life goodbye. Adam was practically foaming at the mouth, spitting obscenities at him and looking for all the world like he was possessed; there was no telling what he was capable of, in that moment.

A sharp kick connected with his ribs, but still, he held tightly on to the bat, curling in on himself and trying to protect his head as much as he could. If he could just get some traction, and lose some of the spots that were clouding his vision, he would be able to launch a decent enough defense…

Another kick, a broken rib, and a hoarse cry of pain was apparently the price he needed to pay for Fate to give him a break. The door to his house flew open, banging against the wall with a thud, and Jensen heard Eric yell something at Adam; what, he couldn’t be entirely certain, since his head was still ringing from the kick he’d taken.

Unsurprisingly, Adam took off running, and for a moment, Jensen just laid on the unforgiving ground, cradling his head and trying in vain to get his breathing to resemble something normal. Thoughts were trying to assault his brain – words like ambush, and distraction and stalking floating around – but with a small groan, the Ackles just shut his inner voice up. He could think in a few minutes, just as soon as it stopped feeling like his head was going to explode off his neck.

“Jensen?! Hey, c’mon, Sport, talk to me,” Eric was saying, sounding frantic even as gentle hands helped him to sit up, moving to brace Jensen against him. “Where are you hurt, kiddo?”

For a second, Jensen truly felt like a child; as though he’d simply skinned his knee and Eric was there to patch him up. Giving into the feeling, just for a second, he hid his face in his foster father’s shoulder, closing his eyes against the throb that came from too many different places at once. Cold fingers touched the side of his head, making Jensen whine slightly in protest, his head splitting open as he pushed away.

Catching sight of Eric’s face, Jensen bit down the sound. He had rarely seen the look that was on his foster father’s face at that moment; absolute fury, even as it was sidelined by fear and concern and hurt.

Like the expression he’d had when they’d told him that Jody was gone.

Swallowing, because he needed to get that look off Eric’s face, Jensen forced himself to speak. “M’fine,” he said first, even knowing that it wasn’t true. He had at least a broken rib and a concussion, probably some deep bruising on his back and palm, but more important, was keeping Eric calm. “M’okay, Dad, just… Jesus,” he cursed, biting back a cuss as his head exploded in pain all over again. “Need some ice,” he gritted out, knowing that ice was the absolute least of what he needed. But it was where he’d always started when Eric used to smack him around.

Maybe he knew that, or maybe the whole situation was just phasing him out, because Eric nodded jerkily, stumbling into the house and obeying without question. It felt weird to Jensen, as though he was the one giving his own father orders, but he didn’t dare think on it too much. He was already in agony and didn’t need piling it on.

Jensen laid on his side on the ground as soon as Eric disappeared into the house, giving into the pain for another brief moment. Something about the whole attack seemed way too staged – planned?
Planned how? For what reason? – for it to sit well with him. It was, however, extremely difficult for him to structure his considerations into any sort of order, and if his train of thought wasn’t already scattered enough, it was destroyed again by the screech of breaks that he knew signaled his Alpha’s arrival.

It took less than a second for Jared to reach his side, twin shouts echoing around him that Jensen had to assume came from Chris and Chad. Focusing only on hazel eyes in an attempt to be coherent, Jensen shut out the rapid fire questions that Jared was shooting at him.

“Adam,” he eventually blurted out, hand closing blindly (when had he closed his eyes?) over Jared’s forearm. “Bastard… snuck up behind me…”

“Baby…” Jared murmured, sounding aghast, the repeated cusses from Chris and Chad becoming background noise to Jensen. With utmost care, the Alpha helped him to a seated position, looking equally like he wanted to cradle Jensen and never let him go, or hunt Adam down and mete out his own brand of payback.

Clumsily, Jensen tried to curl a hand around Jared’s. “Don’t go,” he mumbled, sensing that the Alpha was leaning towards the latter. “Something’s… off,” he tried to explain, willing the words to string into logical sentences to no avail. “Don’t go after him,” he repeated instead, blinking owlishly at his furious lover. “Jus’ let it go.”

“The hell I will!” Jared snapped, even as his hands remained gentle, easing away from Jensen’s weak hold. “That son of a bitch put his hands on you too many times, Jen, this time he pays.”

The Alpha stood up decisively, ignoring Jensen’s ragged protest. Apparently Chris and Chad felt similarly, because they followed Jared, getting into the car and tearing off in the direction that Adam had run in. And how exactly had they…

…oh, right. Wolf senses. Tracking. Fuck, had he taken that hard of a hit?

Fumbling to stand, and failing dismally, Jensen forced himself to think past the splitting ache in his head. Ambush… this had been an ambush, he could settle on that much in his mind.

Except. If it had been an ambush, then that sort of implied that Adam had known he would be alone. Which meant that he had been… watching Jensen?

That didn’t seem right. Jensen was always aware of his surroundings, he would have known immediately if they had ever been followed.

Disregarding the how, he tried to focus on the why instead. What did Adam possibly have to gain by attacking him in front of his own home, especially knowing that Jared would tear him to pieces if he laid a finger on Jensen again? He had nothing to gain, not a single thing, unless his goal had been to set Jared on his trail.

Set Jared on his trail.

The thought stuck in Jensen’s head insistently, refusing to be silenced.

“Doesn’t make sense,” he muttered faintly to himself, pressing his unbruised palm over his eyes and wincing in pain. What would Adam have to gain by being hunted down by Jared?

No.

Realization barreled into Jensen, hitting him almost as hard as Adam’s knee had.
He was asking the wrong question.

Not what *Adam* had to gain… but *who* had *anything* to gain from Jared hunting his abusive ex down.

And that answer was simple. Because the consequence of his Alpha hunting Adam down?

He wasn’t around to protect Jensen.

The future Beta gasped soundlessly, aiming wide green eyes at Eric as he ran back out with an ice pack. Uncharacteristic panic clawed at Jensen’s throat when he realized just how vulnerable he was; injured and human, with a clueless Eric at his side and his Alpha hunting down Adam with bloodthirsty single-mindedness.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“Hey, what’s wrong, sport?” Eric asked him worriedly, and with a start, Jensen realized he’d been cursing out loud. It wasn’t to be helped, though, especially not when green eyes flicked over to the shrubbery that lined their house and caught a flash of amber.

The ambush wasn’t Adam’s.

*Adam* was the red herring. Not the false threat on the Padalecki lands.

The ambush was *here*. And Jensen was helpless.

Adrenaline pushed him to his feet. “We need to get inside, Dad, right now!” he snapped, hustling Eric in front of him and slamming the door shut, throwing the locks with shaking hands. Before his foster father could ask him any questions, a heavy thud landed against the door, making clear the intentions of the person behind it.

To break the damned thing down.

Eric was firing questions at him, eyes wide with panic that Jensen was trying not to mirror. Desperately, he dialed Jared’s cell, needing to trust that his mate would call in the cavalry before storming in.

Except that Jared wasn’t even answering his fucking phone.

Another heavy thud slammed the door, this time accompanied with a splintering sound, and all at once, Jensen knew that they were going to get in even before the Padalecki pack could get there.

For once, he was all out of ideas.

###

Chapter End Notes

Well! Some loose ends tied up and other questions raised, and of course, a signature
cliffhanger ;-) Don't worry, loves, I've got the next chapter planned out and ready to be written! I'm not leaving this one unfinished <3

Big thank you, again, to all of y'all who have stuck with me this long! <3
The Red Herring

Chapter Notes

Wow! Chapter 50 *shakes head in amazement* I can't believe we're here!

Thank you so much to every one of you beautiful readers for sticking with me so long <3 You are all amazing! And I love you guys to bits.

Shoutout to Robinmatshe, Halfwit, and littlesliceofheavenonearth (Renee); three readers who always have such kind words to share whenever RL gets me down. It means so much to me that you wonderful people are still with me!

Also, to Karategrl80, for the virtual cookies and milk! ;-) I totally think it helped me update faster! <3

Lastly, a most special shoutout to lovefinder: This amazing reader, its just come to my attention, has been with me through this entire ride, since day one. Chapter 1 through till chapter 50, you've always been around, often the first to comment, and I'm so humbled to know that you've shared every step of the journey with me. Thank you!

You're all amazing, and I love you all so much. That said, buckle in! This chapter is going to be a rough one.

**WARNING: Triggers for violence and intense feels**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*Jared*~

Fury, the likes of which he had rarely known before, coursed through his veins like liquid fire.

Every time he blinked, all he could see was Jensen lying on the ground, bruises already blossoming over his fair skin, barely able to focus on him for longer than a few seconds at a time. When they’d first pulled up, Jared had had the fleeting thought that Jensen’s foster father had reverted to his old ways, but the dominant concern in him that had him checking on his mate first, had also served to stop him long enough to learn otherwise.

It had been his stupid mistake to assume that Gilligan had learned his lesson the first time. it had been his woefully inaccurate supposition that the past few weeks of radio silence meant that the bastard had taken his warnings to heart and headed back to where he’d come from. Jared wasn’t prepared to make that mistake again, not even when faced with Jensen’s broken plea for him to just let it go.

He got into the car, mostly because he knew he wouldn’t be needing his Were form to tear Gilligan limb from limb, nor did he wish to miss the pleasure of doing so with his bare hands. Chad and Chris followed suit, looking almost as murderous as he had to presume he looked, and though he resented the fact that he’d have to give them their turns, he also accepted that they loved Jensen and wanted to protect him.
For the first time in his life, he was thankful for the smell of Jensen’s fresh blood; it made it exponentially easier to track the asshole carrying the scent, and it didn’t take ten minutes to spot Gilligan running up ahead. Jared felt his phone buzz in his pocket but he ignored it, every other thought and feeling drowning underneath the roaring blaze that was his temper. Chad fishtailed the car around, a few meters away from Gilligan, and Jared wasted no time in jumping out of the car and closing the distance between them, tackling the abusive scumbag to the ground before raining his fists upon him.

“Goddamn… stupid… son of a… bitch…” he punctuated his words with blows to the other guy’s midsection, his face, anywhere that Jared could reach. “Told you… don’t… fucking… touch… my Jensen…”

Jared wasn’t even aware of the words (or rather, cusses interspersed with words) that were leaving his lips, nor was he aware of the weak punches that Gilligan tried to throw in defense. Some of them even landed, but with less force than Meghan put behind her punches, so it barely registered on the Alpha’s radar.

What did register, was the moment that Gilligan’s eyes flashed amber.

It only took that second of shock for Adam to shove Jared off, with force that the Alpha only now realized he shouldn’t have possessed. Chris looked like he was about to take his turn at Gilligan, but foreseeing what he was about to do, Jared snapped out a sharp warning, his Alpha timbre stopping Kane in his tracks.

A second later, there stood a tawny colored wolf in Adam’s place.

What the actual fuck…

There was no time to think about the semantics of Jensen’s ex-boyfriend having apparently been turned into a werewolf, because in the next moment, Gilligan was lunging at a prone Chris, who was still in his human form. Thankfully Chad, who was closer than Jared was, reacted quickly to the threat, shifting and ramming his slightly bigger form into Gilligan’s before he could attack Kane.

“Call my dad!” Jared snapped his directive at Chris, knowing with sudden clarity that he was going to kill Adam. Not only, now, for what he had done to Jared’s mate, but also because he had a duty as Alpha to protect his pack. Gilligan was the very definition of a threat, at that moment, and Jared was eager to take advantage of the fact.

Chad was holding his own – easily, from what Jared could tell, Gilligan was about as familiar with his form as a pup – but as the Alpha shifted, he growled out a warning to his second-in-command. Chad didn’t need the verbalization to understand that Jared wanted to handle this himself, and he promptly backed away, leaving Jared to face the sand colored alpha.

Who turned you? he demanded, his tone infused with command that even Adam struggled against, despite the fact that Jared wasn’t his Alpha. Instead of answering, the smaller wolf threw himself at Jared, a clumsy attack that the Padalecki heir easily disassembled. Throwing his bulk at Adam’s side, Jared twisted so that he landed on the other wolf, pinning Adam down with a paw against his throat. Snapping his jaws threateningly, Jared repeated the question in booming mindspeak that he was sure some of his own pack would hear the echo of.

Jared!

It took him a second to realize that his name hadn’t come from Adam, but from his own head, which meant… Jensen?
Fuck, Jay, I don’t know how you’re even supposed to hear this, his mate was saying, obviously not expecting to be heard, but I need help! Adam wasn’t the ambush, he was the red herring; I’m in the house with Eric but they got through the door and I don’t know how many of them there are! I’m going to try, but I don’t think I can hold off an entire attack.

In a sickening flash of comprehension, Jared understood.

That bad feeling he’d had earlier had nothing to do with a threat to the borders. He had been right at the outset, thinking the threat was bogus, but it wasn’t for the reasons he had feared; it had been engineered to keep him away from Jensen. Not, like he had thought, because Adam wanted his hands on the future Padalecki Beta, but because Gilligan was the distraction. The distraction that would pull Jared away in time for an attack to be launched on a vulnerable Jensen.

Fuck.

With a snarl of unadulterated fury, he increased the pressure he was putting on Adam’s windpipe, intent on getting an answer so that he would either have verbal confirmation of the pack treaty being broken, or killing the bastard pinned underneath him. Either outcome was a win in his book.

Another voice entered his mind, this time belonging to his father. Watch him till I get there, Jared, and keep him alive. We need to know who turned him.

Normally, Jared would have conceded, if only because it was a dangerous precedent to rebel too much against his father while he was still, technically, Alpha, but he’d heard his mate’s voice. Jensen was scared; something that Jared had not witnessed until today; and if there was something that was phasing his unflappable mate, then Jared knew that the threat was real, and immediate.

No way was he waiting around for his father to arrive.

Can’t, he replied to Gerald Padalecki shortly. Chad picked up on his intention from the short reply, and as Jared released his grip on the smaller wolf, his second-in-command was there, pinning him again even before Gilligan could get up. Jensen’s in trouble, there’s some sort of attack at his house. I need backup.

Even as he began to run back in the direction of his mate’s house, he heard Chris shift and follow him, right on his heels as they ran as fast as they could. Over mindspeak, he heard his father barking out orders to some of the other alphas, an undercurrent of tension in his voice that spoke more about his softer feelings towards Jensen than anything else he’d done in the last few months.

Jared’s heart was beating triple time in his chest, his mind flashing to all sorts of worst case scenarios. He tried reaching out to his mate but he was met with nothing but proverbial static, and he could only hope that it meant Jensen was focused elsewhere and not that he was unconscious.

Or worse.

An unfamiliar howl suddenly filled the air, lasting only a moment before being cut brutally short. Jared stopped in his tracks, his ears flicking as he tried to place the direction of the sound, and the Alpha felt his heart trip again when he realized it had come from where they’d left Chad and Adam.

Chad?!

I’m good, his best friend assured him grimly. Fucker caught me off guard but I’ve got him. Go!

He didn’t need telling twice.
Glancing at Chris and seeing the grimness reflected at him from amber orbs, both wolves wordlessly took off towards Jensen’s house at a dead run, dreading what they would find when they got there.

~*Jensen*~

Whoever – whatever – was on the other side of the door slammed against the wood again, the splintering sound becoming louder. In an instant, Jensen knew with frightening clarity that both he and Eric were dead if they weren’t moving.

Snapping into action, he grabbed his foster father’s bicep, all but dragging him to the staircase amidst the babbled protests and questions. Adrenaline was a blessed thing to the future Beta in that moment, allowing him to push the pain of his injuries to the back of his mind in favour of trying to stay alive, which didn’t seem to be on the agenda of the unknown wolves attacking his home.

“Jensen, what the fuck is happening?” Eric shouted as they stumbled up the stairs, the hysteria in his voice suddenly reaching Jensen’s awareness. The man looked to be a few paces ahead of completely terrified, his eyes bright with panic and fear, and though Jensen felt badly for it, he also didn’t have time to mollycoddle and ease Eric into the reality of their situation.

“We’re under attack!” he yelled back bluntly, jerking instinctively at the next slam against the door, which seemed about two more hits from giving way completely. “They’re werewolves, and by my estimation, these ones are pretty fucking bloodthirsty, so we need to get the fuck to my room!”

If this were any other situation, Jensen would have probably been reprimanded for his language – certainly, Jody would have been appalled at the words coming out of his mouth – but unsurprisingly, the cussing was barely a blip on either man’s radar.

To his credit, Eric didn’t ask why the destination was Jensen’s room, and he was glad of it. Honestly, there was only so much explaining he could bring himself to do while he was also trying his damndest to keep them alive.

While Eric scrambled to lock his door, Jensen upended the bottom drawer of his dresser, searching for his stash of knives in a frenzy. He had to have a silver knife somewhere in his mini arsenal, he was sure of it… with the sheer amount of them that he owned, odds were that there had to be at least one silver knife among them, right? Surely his luck wasn’t that abysmal?

The future Beta nearly sobbed in relief as he unsheathed the monogrammed knife that Josh had left in front of the club for him all those months ago, before they had even been reunited. The leather pouch slid away easily, revealing a long and wicked looking silver blade with the familiar insignia of his initials on the handle. Back then, he had been concerned that the knife had been a message of threat towards Jared and the pack, and when he’d learned that Josh had been the one to leave it there, that worry had turned to annoyance at the insisted wariness his brother held against his new family.

Now, Josh was accepting of the Padalecki pack and Jared, but, Jensen needed to remember to thank him profusely when next they spoke, for being so paranoid to begin with.

Eric, who had been handling the situation as best he’d been able, paled at the sight of his various weapons. “Where did you get all of those?!” he asked, his voice pitching dangerously high, and Jensen rolled his eyes slightly. Remembering that Eric had served a while in the military before they’d adopted him, he decided to try appealing to the soldier side of his foster father instead.
“Dad!” he barked, hardening his eyes and gripping the older man’s shoulder, jerking sharply to focus his attention. “There’s a threat out there that needs neutralizing,” he summarized succinctly, his voice nothing more than a harsh snap. “We don’t, we die, and it’s as simple as that. I can’t explain everything to you right now, but as soon as I can, I will. Do you understand?”

It could have been any number of things – the harshness of his voice, the dire words he had spoken, even the fact that he looked prepped for war – but whatever it was broke Eric free from whatever disbelieving stupor he’d fallen into, enough to recognize the very real danger that they were in. It was in good time, too, because an almighty crash from downstairs told Jensen that the wolves he’d glimpsed through the front window had broken through the door at long last.

In a last Hail Mary of an attempt to contact his Alpha, Jensen shut his eyes and threw out a message over their bond. Fuck, Jay, I don’t know how you’re even supposed to hear this, but I need help! Adam wasn’t the ambush, he was the red herring; I’m in the house with Eric but they got through the door and I don’t know how many of them there are. I’m going to try, but I don’t think I can hold off an entire attack.

The growls reached his ears even through his locked bedroom door, bringing him back to the present. Jared had taken off in his human form, so as far Jensen could tell, he was completely on his own with this. Shoving the churning fear down, he flipped the knife so that the handle was held out to Eric, offering it to his foster father.

His other blades would be useless against wolves, but he had enough skill with a knife that he could make up for that with speed and accuracy. Eric needed all the help he could get.

“Aim for their throats,” Jensen directed lowly, picking up another long, curved blade and trying not to think about the fact that the wolves were actually human. This was a life or death situation and he couldn’t afford to be squeamish because he was choosing to live.

As he tested the sharpness of the knife, the glint of his ring caught his eye, and all at once, Jensen flashed back to the memory of his time with Rosen Ackles, ingrained deep in his memory:

“I have a spirit animal?” Jensen double-checked, and Rosen nodded with a pleased smile. “An animal that is a manifestation of my soul, and one that will guide and protect me at any given time? And I would be able to shift into this animal if I were to heal someone?”

“Yes, yes, and no.” The man leaned forward to elaborate. “You have a spirit animal, yes, and he will protect you, yes, but the blood line has been diluted for centuries. Had your bloodline been slightly stronger, then you may have been able to shift forms physically, but that is not the case.”

His spirit animal.

Micky had warned him already, that he needed to get a better handle on his power before he would be able to call his spirit animal forth. According to Ozera, the most difficult part was calling the animal to the surface, and once he did, it would remain with him almost constantly, but the amount of energy it took to bring his spirit animal would drain him for several days, not to mention how dangerous it would be to channel the magic inwardly without first knowing how to control it.

Well, they certainly hadn’t foreseen this circumstance, so Jensen reasoned that a long shot, was probably his only shot.
Forcing himself to take deep breaths, Jensen tried to recall the lessons he’d been having over the past two weeks, remembering that the first step was clearing his mind. Through sheer force of will, and no small amount of desperation, he managed the feat, feeling the telltale buzz of energy spreading over his skin.

Just as he began to feel the hum of magic – and despite the situation, he was still as fascinated by the murmur as he had been last week after feeling it the first time – he also heard the crack as his own door started splintering, significantly weaker than the heavy oak of their front door. Pushing himself harder, Jensen felt something ignite in his veins; like he was being burned from the inside out, the same way it had felt when he’d healed Jared in the warehouse that day.

Forcing himself to think past the pain, Jensen directed the energy inwardly, trying desperately to do so in increments, gradually, lest he fry his insides for his effort. The pain doubled, but all of a sudden, firm hands were shaking him, and like a rubber band snapping back into place, his concentration was broken and so was the connection.

Jensen swayed on his feet, pitching forward and only missing to kiss the ground by Eric’s arms around his waist, steadying him. “What…”

“I don’t know what you were doing, Sport,” Eric muttered, looking grim and exceedingly pale, “but you were killing yourself trying.”

Shifting, the Ackles felt a sharp pain against his chest, and sure enough, as he looked down, he caught sight of the nasty looking burn that he somehow knew went further than his collarbone. Helpless frustration made him growl slightly, and it was only compounded when Eric began hustling him towards the built-in wardrobe. “What are you…”

He didn’t get to finish the question, but he got his answer anyway, as his foster father pushed him through the door. Jensen stumbled, falling to his knees and inwardly thanking whoever built the place for making such a stupidly large closet, one that would be large enough to provide one more barrier between the wolves, and him and Eric.

Except…

Except that Eric wasn’t closing the door behind him.

No.

He was taking the key off the door, and stepping back.

Too late, Jensen realized what was happening.

As he lunged forward, Eric slammed the door shut and locked it from the outside, using something, presumably the handle of his knife, to break the key inside the lock.

“Dad!” he snapped, banging his fist weakly against the door, terror anew washing over him. What the hell was Eric thinking?! There was no way he could… no way he would… “Open the fucking door!” he yelled hoarsely, foregoing the logic that told him there was no way Eric could take cover with him unless he broke down the door. Jensen began to tremble slightly, from fear or exhaustion, or both, he couldn’t say.

The splintering of his door was deafening, even through the roar in his ears.

He slammed his fists against the door again, but before he could yell anything, Eric’s oddly calm voice drifted through the wood. “You said it yourself, Sport. Whatever’s out there is pretty fucking
bloodthirsty.”

“Dad, don’t be stupid,” Jensen snarled helplessly, his chest constricting with emotion. Every inch of him ached, but none more so than the pit of dread that was pulsing in the region of his stomach.

“I let you down enough, Jensen,” came his only reply. Eric’s voice, contrary to his own, held no panic or fear. There was only deep regret in those words, like…

Like it was the last things he needed to say.

Jensen’s eyes began to burn and he swallowed down the lump that was tying his throat up. “Dad, just listen to me, okay?” he pleaded urgently, ramming his shoulder against the door but unable to summon the strength enough to do more than rattle it. “You have no clue what’s outside that door, and I do! Just let out, let me help…”

“I can say with every certainty that your mom would find a way to kill me again if I let you come outta there, kiddo,” Eric snorted, and the sound, for some reason, only hurt Jensen even more. “Love you, Jensen, okay?”

The words made him pummel the door even harder, fighting for energy enough to get through it. Before he could reply, before he could do anything more than take in a shuddering breath, he heard the shatter of his door and the telltale growls of an enemy that would take out anything in the path to get to him.

And then the sound of screaming.

Eric’s cries of pain mingled with Jensen’s shouts; broken pleas of ‘Dad!’ and ‘stop!’ and ‘please!’ and ‘leave him alone!’ all to the background noise of Jensen slamming his body against the door. He tried to summon his spirit animal again, not caring if it burnt layers of his skin off in the process, but clearing his mind was a far-off dream, not while his foster father was being torn apart mere inches away from him.

The sound of a far-off howl cut through the air, making silence descend so suddenly upon them that Jensen held his breath without thinking. In the next moment, there was a clamoring of barks and growls and the scratch of claws against hardwood that told him the wolves were running away.

Running from what? Had that howl been one of the pack’s? Because it definitely wasn’t Jared’s, Jensen would have felt it if the howl had come from him, the future Beta in him was sure of that.

It didn’t matter when an awful groan filled the air, making Jensen redouble his efforts to get to Eric. He was still alive, he could still heal, Jensen could heal him…

Finally (too late, you’re too late) the lock gave way, some of the wood off the side chipping as Jensen forced the door open. He went stumbling with the force of it, landing hard on his knees.

As he came face to face with the carnage that had been left behind, Jensen thought he would be sick. Eric was lying in a pool of his own blood, his chest and one leg slashed practically to ribbons, making it a wonder that he was still conscious.

Only, he wasn’t, anymore.

“Dad!” Jensen choked off, only realizing that tears were streaming from his eyes when he had to blink them away. Helplessly, he crawled to where his foster father laid, hands shaking violently as he reached out, afraid to touch.
Afraid he would hurt Eric even more.

A crash came from downstairs, making Jensen startle viciously, but it was quickly followed up by Jared’s voice in his head, calling out frantically for him.

Jensen couldn’t bring himself to respond.

Instead, he focused on Eric, willing his hands to stop shaking long enough to feel for a pulse. Willing the pull of unconsciousness to ebb away just far enough to see if there was chance for Eric. But he couldn’t do it, he couldn’t focus, he couldn’t feel anything…

“Jensen!” Jared’s voice, a mix of panic and relief, and human now, materialized in the doorway, climbing over the broken remnants of what used to be his bedroom door. His Alpha was there in a second, arms bracing him around his waist, trying to softly tug him away from the horrific scene. Still, the future Beta couldn’t bring himself to leave. Couldn’t bring himself to turn away. Couldn’t bring himself to do anything except desperately try to summon the burning energy to his trembling hands to try to fix Eric, to try to heal him.

You cannot, a voice that sounded a lot like Rosen’s drifted into his awareness. You are not strong enough, young one, you were hurt too badly.

Gentle hands, hands he knew belonged to Jared, tried to urge him away from the mangled corpse of his foster father, murmuring softly, words that Jensen couldn’t even hear over the sounds of gasping breaths that he only now realized were being ripped from his lungs. Overcome with fatigue and distress and pain, the future Beta suddenly couldn’t find it in himself to do anything more than turn into his Alpha’s familiar arms, and allow the darkness at the edges of his vision to take him over.

~*Chris*~

The sight that met his eyes when he reached Jensen’s house, threw Chris back nine years to a similar scene of blood and destruction that had decorated his own childhood home.

Running with Jared once they’d realized Jensen was in danger, the alpha had thought of nothing except tearing the throats out of any wolf who was threatening his surrogate brother. He wasn’t sure how any of the day’s events fit in or led to this, but he didn’t care; the only thing that mattered to him, the only blindingly powerful force pushing him, was the need to protect the green-eyed future Beta that meant more to him than anyone outside of Sophia.

But then he had seen the front door in shambles. Had heard the gasping sobs coming from upstairs. Had smelt the blood.

And for the first time, Chris Kane had had to consider the possibility that the scene he was about to walk into wouldn’t include any protecting, but would rather be frighteningly reminiscent of the last time he’d held his baby brother’s dead body in his arms.

Jared didn’t seem to share in his reservations, bounding up the stairs and shifting along the landing. It was only when the Alpha blurted out Jensen’s name, in a tone that held a measure of relief, that Chris managed to release the breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

Okay. He’s okay. You didn’t lose your brother again.
Repeating the words to himself, he forced himself to ascend the stairs, ignoring the distinctive grooves in the destruction around him that reminded him of the attack that had come upon his family all those many years ago. Pushing down the old panic that still sometimes managed to overcome him, make him feel all of 9 years old again. Shifting and approaching the room he knew to be Jensen’s, Chris almost lost his stomach when he caught sight of the state of the room.

Red splattered across the once-blue walls, stained the once-beige floor, a deep crimson colour that couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than blood. For one crazy second, Chris thought that they could very well have let a child with a dripping red paintbrush go wild inside the room, and the scene would be somewhat the same.

Except that in the middle of the room, there was Jensen, hunched over the still form of what remained of his foster father, batting weakly at Jared’s hands as he tried to pull him away, probably unaware that he was even doing so.

Numb and shaky at the gory scene, which only seemed to emphasize the fact that it could just as easily have been Jensen’s body lying there, Chris could only stand motionless around the shattered door. Scenes from the past converged with the horror show he was looking at that would forever be imprinted in his mind. It took conscious effort for the alpha to remind himself to breathe, and remind himself that he would not be hearing that grating sound of a zipper closing around Hardison’s body. That he would not have to change out of clothes that were covered in his parents’ blood.

That this was different, and that Jensen was there, and maybe he was hurt, maybe he was traumatized in the worst way, but he was moving and he was breathing and that was all that Chris could bring himself to ask for because he wasn’t sure that he would have been able to handle losing a little brother twice.

He stayed that way, frozen, until the moment that Jensen slumped into Jared, apparently having taken too much strain in the past – *fuck* had it only been 30-odd minutes since they’d left the Padalecki lands?

Without faltering, the Alpha gathered his Beta close, murmuring to him in such a low voice that not even Chris’ enhanced hearing picked up on the words; meant, obviously, only for a lover’s ears. Jared cradled Jensen in his arms, taking utmost care as he stood up and carried his mate away from the bedlam, towards where Kane knew the guest bedroom to be.

Chris made to follow, but before he could, a faint buzzing sound stopped him. Blue eyes cast restlessly over the scene again, reluctant to observe the finer details but spurred on by curiosity.

*There.*

Jensen’s phone was laid face down on top of the dresser, as if carelessly thrown there before ransacking the bottom drawer, which Chris now noticed held a variety of knives and daggers. The violent vibrations pushed the device closer to edge and, wanting to save his best friend the added hassle of looking for a new phone, Chris lurched forward quickly, averting his eyes from the worst of the scene and focusing on reaching the dresser without stepping in blood, instead.

As he plucked the offending object up, saving it from a cracked screen no doubt, his eyes, while avoiding the blood and gore, caught sight instead of a pencil drawing that Jensen had left there, probably straight after he’d done it and probably without thinking, if Chris knew him. It was a woman with long hair and a slight frame and big, doe eyes…

…big doe eyes that he knew.
Frowning slightly, Chris pocketed the phone and picked up the hastily drawn sketch, studying it closer. A memory, crystal clear in his head despite how long ago it was, surfaced to the forefront of his mind.

The sound of his little brother screaming and crying out for him played on a loop in his mind, until Chris wondered whether he was ever going to be able to hear anything else.

The sight of his whole family, torn open and unmoving, assaulted his vision every time he closed his eyes, until Chris wondered whether he was ever going to be able to see anything else.

And the smell – that distinctive, coppery smell – of blood... well, he smelt that everywhere he went. He was almost already resigned to the scent being stuck in his stupidly sensitive nose.

The nine-year-old shivered, curling in on himself and hiding his face in his arms, as if that would make everything better. He knew it wouldn't; he knew that when the Beta found him, or the Alpha if he was unlucky, that he would be dragged back to the real world, where his parents were dead and his brother was dead and Chris had failed, failed, failed to protect any of them; but for now? For this single, isolated moment in time?

He pretended.

He pretended he was back in that closet he had been hiding in, and that his baby brother was about to pop in with a delighted shriek of 'Found ya, Chrissie!'; that stupid nickname that only Hardison could get away with. He pretended that his mother's rich laughter would follow the shout, and that he would share a look of fond exasperation with her, because they'd been trying so hard to teach Hardison about an inside voice. He pretended that his father would peek his head into the room, wanting to see what the commotion was about before scooping them both up in his big arms and winking at Chris' momma, hauling them outside for a proper game of hide and seek.

He pretended that life was still okay.

Even though he knew it would never be, again.

Stifling a sob, Chris began to rock slightly in place, wanting nothing more in that moment than he wanted his mother's arms to go around him and hold him close and tight, promise him that he was going to be alright. Or his father's steady arm to clamp around the back of his neck and look him in the eye, tell him that he was strong enough to be without them.

How was he supposed to do this? How was he supposed to be alone for his whole life? He was only a kid, he needed his family!

Suddenly, arms came around him, and for one single, foolish second, Chris thought that someone had heard his pleas and gave his momma back to him.

But those weren't her arms. Chris knew his mother's hug, and this wasn't it.

Deflating when he realized that Mrs. Padalecki had found him, Chris couldn't find it in himself to fight against her hold. In fact, he leaned into it, because he knew in his heart that he was never going to feel his mother's embrace again and he wanted, for a moment, to imagine that this was a valid substitute.

“I'm so sorry for what happened to them, darling.”
Chris started when he realized that the voice didn’t belong to the Beta, but to some strange woman. Blue eyes flew opened, aimed wide at the lady with a silent question within them. She was pretty; in that old lady sort of way; but what caught Chris’ attention, was the bouquet of flowers that she was carrying. He supposed it wasn’t unheard of; they were in a cemetery, after all; but the confusion set in when she placed the flowers on his parents’ joint headstone.

Had she known his mother and father? If she had, then why didn’t Chris know her?

Smiling sadly at him, she drew a hand through his hair before pressing a small kiss to the crown of his head. She offered no more words as she stood up and left, but the gesture – similar to what his mother sometimes used to do to him and Hardison – actually made Chris feel a smidgen less like he was about to explode with the force of his grief.

Though he had never seen her again, Chris could never forget the woman’s face, or the sad grey eyes that had looked upon him as though she could feel his pain. He did know this woman, but the question…

The question was, how did Jensen?

~*Jared*~

The Alpha didn’t know what he was feeling in that moment.

As he carried his unconscious mate out of that room – a room that just hours ago, he and Jensen had been kissing in, been throwing pillows, been laughing and living and loving – Jared couldn’t help but shiver, horror tingling down his spine.

The story that was being told by the splashes and pools of blood was a gruesome one; when he’d first glanced into the room, heart beating through his chest, he had been deathly afraid of seeing the love of his life dead on the floor, despite the logic that told him Jensen was alive as long as he could feel the mating bond.

Jared was unafraid to admit that, despite how obviously horrific the sight was, his first feeling was a bowling over of relief, because his eyes had traveled first to the upright form of his mate. No matter what, the Alpha couldn’t help feeling ferociously grateful that his soul mate was still breathing; battered and bruised, but alive.

After the initial shock of relief had subsided, that was when the horror set in, and his stomach had almost revolted at the state of the injuries that Eric Kripke had sustained. He’d hated the man, for what he had done to Jensen, but the kind of end he had met… well, no one deserved that sort of fate. He couldn’t afford to dwell on the pity for too long, however, because as it always was, his main concern was Jensen, and his mate’s suffering was easy to see.

Aside from the physical damage, there would be a whole new level of emotional damage that would come from going through what Jensen had been forced to witness. No matter Jared’s feelings on the man, his mate had still loved Kripke as the father he had known, and the father the man had been trying to return to being; the trauma and the grief had been painted across Jensen’s features as starkly as the blood had stood out against the off-white floors.
Still, it had taken several minutes to pry the future Beta away, and even then, Jared hadn’t been sure that it was his doing, or Jensen’s injuries that had forced him to capitulate. The latter had begun to seem more likely when his mate’s green eyes slipped closed and Jensen lost his battle with consciousness.

Now, as he laid Jensen on the guest bed, not wanting to move him far before he knew his mate’s injuries, Jared allowed himself to tremble with the force of his relief, combined with regret and shock at the loss of Jensen’s foster father. With a palm pressed against his eyes, he wondered when, if ever, he would be able to get that sight out of his head, and if he was feeling this way, then Jared could only imagine how difficult this was going to be on his lover. Jensen was going to carry this scar on his heart for the rest of the life, and there was nothing Jared could do about it. What would this take out of him, remembering that scene? Remembering the screams?

This whole situation was just a clusterfuck of epic proportions.

A hesitant rap on the door made the Alpha glance up sharply; Chris stood there, half in the hallway, holding up Jensen’s phone with an uncertain expression on his otherwise pale and grim face. Too late, Jared remembered the events of nine years ago, and how the room might have affected Kane, but before he could apologize or urge the alpha to leave whenever he needed to, Chris was shaking his head. A minute movement, but one that told Jared just how much the other wolf didn’t want to discuss the parallels.

“Someone’s trying to get hold of Jen,” Chris muttered, holding up the phone as it started buzzing. “Third time trying.”

Jared caught the phone as Kane tossed it to him. He frowned slightly at the unrecognized number, but when he placed the area code, he realized quickly who it was. “Mr. Ozera.”

“Jared?” the Shaman sounded harassed, over and above the confusion that tinted his name. “Where’s Jensen? Is he okay? Because I just had a very pissed off Rosen Ackles in my face, yelling at me that I didn’t help his twenty-eight times great grandson, and now he was hurt.” Ozera huffed, but the impatience in his tone couldn’t hide the undercurrent of fear that lay there. “You want to explain to me why a spirit who’s only contacted me twice in my lifetime suddenly made an appearance over my peach cobbler?”

The Alpha tried in vain to hold back a sigh, feeling weary at the thought of dealing with Ozera when his focus needed to be on his mate. “There was an attack,” he summarized succinctly, nodding absentely when Chris gestured to him that he was going to contact Beaver. They were definitely going to need that serum again, so that they could heal Jen with Jared’s blood. “Jensen’s okay, but pretty banged up.”

“Banged up how?” Ozera asked, and Jared might’ve sighed again if not for the new and unfiltered tension that entered the older man’s voice. “Jared, is there any sort of burn anywhere on his body?”

Balancing the phone between his ear and shoulder, the Alpha stood over his mate and assessed the damage, gingerly moving his clothes to inspect the skin and spotting a nasty looking red scorch that spanned half of Jensen’s upper body. “A bad one over his collar and chest,” he confirmed, sounding wrecked even to his own ears. “Why?”

There was a slew of curse words that came over the line in place of an answer, as well as the sound of keys jangling that Jared didn’t want to think on the implications of.

“He tried to summon his spirit animal,” Ozera answered finally, sounding distressed. “Rosen said something about energy, but I didn’t figure… fuck!”
“What the hell are you talking about, Ozera?”

“Jensen tried to direct his magic inwards without knowing how to control the power of it,” the Shaman explained urgently. “My best guess is that the energy was too powerful and begun to literally burn him from the inside out, and if I’m right, that burn could be more than superficial skin damage. It could mean internal bleeding, or muscle or tissue damage, it could mean any number of things! He needs to get to a hospital!”

Not for the first time, Jared was intensely thankful for how protective Chris was, knowing that Beaver was on his way, or about to be. “It’s okay,” he was quick to assure the Shaman. “As my mate, Jensen can heal from wounds with a serum that has my blood in it. Our Pack Healer is on his way already, Jensen will be fine.”

The other man’s sound of relief was audible, and not only because Jared had enhanced hearing. “You're sure?” he asked tensely, the movement from the other end ceasing. The Alpha was relieved for it, because he didn’t think Jensen was ready to let everyone else know about Ozera as yet. “Check his pulse, make sure it’s not too fast or thready.”

Because he was also worried about his mate, Jared complied without argument, now grateful for a second time that Jensen had once insisted they learn about basic first aid. One of these days, he mused inwardly, he was going to remember to credit his mate for his foresight.

“It’s steady, if a little fast,” Jared confirmed, after the whole procedure of counting beats. “I’m pretty sure he’ll be fine until we can heal him. A hospital will just take longer.”

For a long moment, he was met with silence, and though the Alpha would never claim to know anything about Mikhail Ozera, he was sure in that moment that the man was struggling with the uncertainty of the situation, as well as his own reluctance to leave Jensen in anyone else’s hands. Jared thought about being offended by it – given that as it stood, Ozera was the stranger in the scenario, not him – but mostly, he understood all too well the feeling of helplessness in the face of Jensen being hurt.

Which only reminded him how many times his Beta had been hurt.

Finally, Ozera offered a gruff, “Thank you for taking care of him.” Before Jared could even think of responding, he had cut the line, and in retrospect, that was probably a good thing because the Alpha was experiencing a sudden and uncomfortable highlight reel in his head, of all the times Jensen had been hurt since coming into his world.

Jared allowed himself to entertain the potent flash of anger that accompanied his memories. He didn’t even know where he was directing it; at the Morgan pack, at the situation, at the goddamn universe; but he let the feeling run its course through his body, resenting all the harsh blows that had been dealt to someone as good and pure-hearted as Jensen was.

“Not gonna help anyone.”

Jared bared his teeth instinctively when a voice startled him, materializing in the doorway. A growl rumbled in the back of his throat, protectiveness on high alert since his mate was hurt and had just been attacked, so it took a moment for him to push his inner Alpha away and recognize Jim. For his part, the elder werewolf just waited patiently for Jared to drop his guard before making his way inside, trusty little bag at the ready.

As he began to unpack the syringe full of serum, Jared asked, “What isn’t going to help anyone?”
The Healer and Chemistry professor glanced up at him, a shrewd expression on his face that Jared knew he wasn’t going to enjoy.

“Your anger,” Jim replied, proving Jared’s suspicion. “It’s not going to help you, it’s not going to help the pack, and it’s certainly not doing anything for your mate.”

Bristling visibly, the Alpha had to remind himself that he valued Jim’s opinion. “You don’t think I have a right to be angry at how much pain my Beta has gone through?” he asked with forced calm.

“Didn’t say you didn’t have the right. I said – don’t you growl at me, boy – I said that it wasn’t going to help anyone.” Jim shot back, carefully sliding the needle into the crook of Jensen’s arm and depressing the plunger. “Be there for your mate, figure out how this happened, and save all that anger for the moment you can use it.”

The advice shocked him; not only because the older alpha was essentially approving his feral intentions towards anyone who had been involved in this attack, but also because he had truly forgotten just how close Jim and his mate had gotten in the last few months. The older man considered Jensen as the cherished son that he’d never had; not that he would ever say so, but to someone who knew him for as long as Jared had known him, it was fairly obvious. Case in point, the absent-minded way in which the Healer brushed his thumb over the little spot where the needle had pierced fair skin, as if in silent apology for causing ever a moment of discomfort, despite the fact that Jensen could neither feel nor respond to it.

Jared wisely didn’t comment, on the gesture or the uncharacteristic bloodthirst of the Healer and Chemistry teacher. Instead, he simply shifted his hazel gaze on to his mate’s prone form, watching raptly as the serum did its job and feeling his concern ebb slowly away.

After a moment, wherein neither wolf had moved, the Padalecki heir asked quietly, “How long until he wakes up?”

Any other time, Jared knew that Jim would have huffed long-sufferingly, rolled his eyes at the Alpha’s impatience, even admonished the question that was so impossible to accurately determine. But perhaps the man could see how helpless and weary he looked, because Jim took pity on him and did none of the above.

“Difficult to say, since we don’t know the extent of his internal injuries,” Beaver replied almost gently. “Your dad’s on the way. He and I will take care of everything in the other room before Jensen wakes up,” he added, tactfully not making mention of the dead body of Jen’s foster father that laid not two doors down from where they were.

Jared nodded his thanks, feeling grateful that he didn’t have to leave his mate’s side. Briefly, he wondered what was going to be done about Adam, but in the face of his injured Beta, the Alpha in him no longer cared about anything else. He was all too happy to leave that asshole’s fate in the hands of his father, because his main concern was Jensen before anything else, even revenge.

Carding a hand through dark blonde locks, Jared sighed inwardly, wondering how he was going to help his lover get through things this time. The events that had transpired this evening were going to haunt and scar, no doubt, and what was worse was the fact that Jared couldn’t conceivably offer his mate any platitudes about how things were going to get better because it was all over now.

Indeed, it seemed as though the war was just beginning.
Weariness lined his features, making Rosen Ackles look a little more like his centuries old spirit.

He sat in solitude upon soft white sands, overlooking the beauty and serenity of a seemingly endless, crystal blue ocean. His green eyes reflected what the calm waters did not; tumultuous discordance, stormy with the force of it and his inner turmoil from the situation which he could play little to no part in.

The cause of his unrest?

Jensen Ross Ackles.

His kin had certainly picked the most complicated path he could have chosen; the one with roots snarled across it and boulders in its way and even the occasional snake amidst it all; but ever since meeting him, Rosen could not deny that Jensen seemed to be the kind of person who could endure it all to get to the nirvana that awaited him on the other side.

From all in the Ackles line who he had ever had the pleasure (or displeasure, as it would sometimes happen) of guiding through the spirit world, Jensen had impressed him most of all. The boy reminded Rosen of himself many moons ago; resilient and tough, while still maintaining compassion and kindness. Open-minded and humble enough to learn from others, but also strong-willed so that he never lost sight of who he was and how far he had come. He represented, to Rosen, the hope that an Ackles would, once again, foster a world of peace and harmony between the species that roamed the earth. For the first time in the longest time, after seeing the ferocity with which his kin loved his mate, Rosen allowed himself to have faith.

He still did. However, he was beginning to realize that this path which Jensen had set himself upon, was far more treacherous than any of them could have possibly anticipated.

As much as he longed to see the utopian world he had envisioned in his head all those many centuries ago, finally come to fruition, Rosen could not help fretting over the price that might need to be paid in order to accomplish it. Before anything else, Jensen was his grandson, despite how many Ackles’ rested between them; Rosen had no wish to see any harm fall upon the kin that he already loved dearly.

He was not, apparently, the only one.

Feeling the man’s presence even before he had fully approached, Rosen calmly spoke. “I had wondered how long it would take for you to search me out.”

Sean Ackles took a seat next to him, a scowl already on his face that was matched by the distress in his eyes. It was not often that the man sought him out, having made the choice to move on instead of lingering on the spirit plane, but since Jensen had discovered his dormant heritage, Sean had been making a far more frequent habit of visiting the spirit plane for what limited moments his power could afford him, wanting to know of his son’s progress controlling his power.

There was a moment of silence that neither of them broke, each wondering where they could begin to talk about the boy they both cared for so deeply.

“I still don’t understand why you won’t tell him what he needs to know.”
Though he had expected the anger to be directed at him, Rosen still sighed. “I told you many times before, the decision does not lie with me. Our power is restricted by forces far greater than I.”

It was true. The fact of it was that Shamans were no more all-powerful than any other being in existence; yes, they had the predisposition to open their minds to planes over and above the mortal one, and had the control enough to channel such energy to comply with their command, but their skills were grossly over exaggerated by those who didn’t have a full understanding of it. They were not, contrary to popular opinion, witches or miracle workers or anything of the like. They were humans just as much as any other, with the solitary exception of being able to connect with a force that others simply overlooked, be it in naiveté or arrogance.

Sean had understood this a long time ago, which was why Rosen had refrained from rebuking him over it. The man, as he understood it, simply deigned to forgo logic in favour of paternal love. It was not a luxury Rosen could afford to have, not when that logic formed the very fibers of their existence on the spirit plane.

It was the number one rule – and the only rule, really – Do not intervene.

Even the warnings that the spirit world managed to give, sending prophetic visions to their chosen few when they could, were limited to the times when their kin was exposed to mortal danger, to themselves or someone they were in contact with. If Rosen were to tell Jensen the details of the big picture – the one he was so close to figuring out himself, already – it would have a ripple effect on them all, and could just as easily collapse the worlds around them with the force of its change. No matter how worried he was over the trials his kin had yet to face, Rosen simply could not jeopardize everything in that way. Not only was it irresponsible, but it was short-sighted and potentially harmful to every being that existed on all the planes, Jensen included.

It simply could not be done.

“What about this?” Sean asked abruptly, flinging a hand in the direction of the blurred image before them, which Rosen had been observing. One that showed Jensen lying immobile upon a bed with his mate bent over his form. “You couldn’t have warned him that he and that piteous excuse for a man were in potentially fatal danger? That wouldn’t have gone against your precious rules, would it have?”

Rosen felt weary at the anger being displayed by Jensen’s father. He understood how easy it was to blame someone else for the misfortune that couldn’t be prevented, but he could not help resenting the implication that he was not trying to do everything in his power to help his kin.

“The ring,” he explained in a carefully controlled voice. “He wears your ring against the visions he has been receiving. Its power has been blocking me from contacting him, and Jensen is not yet in control of his abilities enough to know how to seek me out.” Not for the first time, Rosen cursed the visions that had invaded the mind of his twenty-eight times grandson. Though he understood where they were coming from and appreciated the attempt to warn Jensen against the biggest danger, he couldn’t help wondering what effect they were going to have on the young boy, who only now was discovering his power.

For his part, Sean simply continued scowling at nothing in particular.

Reaching over, he gently clasped the man’s shoulder. “I shall keep trying,” he promised solemnly. “The ring is powerful, but there are ways around it. I will find them.”

All at once, the tension eased out of the man’s frame, making him sag with the true weight of his despair. Rosen could easily empathize with the feeling, since he had become attached enough to the
young man that Jensen’s pain migrated seamlessly into his own heart.

“If Micky would just tell him…” Sean rasped, scrubbing a hand over his face in a gesture of frustration that Rosen had noticed Jensen do many times. “My old friend thinks he’s protecting Jensen, but he isn’t. Micky has the power to give Jensen such a big piece of the puzzle, if only he wasn’t so afraid.”

Rosen nodded gravely, wisely choosing not to mention that Erim’s kin was simply trying to do what he thought was right for the child of his best friend. He could not offer much in defense, since he had expelled his own rage upon the young Ozera not long before. “There is still time,” he comforted softly, spurred into gentleness by the darkness of the air around them. “This battle is far from won.”

“But the tide has also yet to turn,” Sean sighed, looking somber as he cast his gaze over the paradoxically calm water. “In order for there to be any hope of them winning this war, Jensen needs to learn the truth. The truth about what happened sixteen years ago.”

###

Chapter End Notes

*hides*

Well... I did promise that I wasn't going to let Eric off the hook *guiltily covers eyes*

This chapter was an extremely emotional one, and I can only hope I managed to do it justice! This was the darkest chapter we've had yet, and unfortunately, it was necessary to make it a little bad before I can make it better. I also hope that I managed to redeem Eric a little, as a character!

Either way, hold on tight, lovelies! I promise I'll make it better!

Love, Jay <3
The Destruction Of Grief

Chapter Notes

Ugh, I'm the absolute worst for how long it's always taking me to update, and you all are the absolute best and most amazing readers in the history of ever, for the warmth and love and support you all afford me even despite that!

Muse for this baby has been in short reply recently, mostly because I've been having a very hard time in RL and to write Jensen's grief has been dangerous for me, to say the least. I've been writing other little pieces and tidbits, jotting down ideas everywhere for happier things, trying to make it easier for me, and although it's a short chapter, I've managed this much without making myself hurt (much)!

It's a sad one, but don't worry! It gets a little better in the next chapter, and then it's uphill from there; for now ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*Jensen*~

“You said it yourself, Sport. Whatever's out there is pretty fucking bloodthirsty.”

Jensen blinked rapidly, confusion clouding his mind. This… hadn't already happened? Had he dreamt it all? Had it been a really vivid vision?

Deciding not to look a gift horse in the mouth, he slammed his weight against the door, pushing with all the strength he could muster. He could still get out there, he could stop what he knew was going to happen if he stayed in there. Eric didn’t have to die, not today, not before they could go back to being the family they were trying so hard to be.

“Hold on, Dad,” he bit out, his voice taut with tension. “I’m nearly out of here, I can fix this, just find a place to hide! Can you get out of the window?”

“I let you down enough, Jensen.”

Faltering in his motions, the green-eyed future Beta wondered why his foster father seemed to be having his own conversation, barely even reacting to what he was saying. A dark feeling of foreboding clenched his gut and with sweat-cold hands, he reached for the doorknob. Turned it.

No resistance.

He stepped through the door and almost retched at the bloody carnage he was met with. Eric’s body lay there, shredded and torn and bloody, his eyes open and unseeing.

“Love you, Jensen, okay?”

Tears clogged his throat as the words echoed in his mind, coming not from the corpse that was splayed out before him, but from the memory of the last words ever spoken by the man.
Jensen’s knees gave out, thudding unforgivingly against the floor. “Dad, I’m sorry,” he whispered, voice thick with emotion. “I should have told you. I should have…”

“You should have what?” All at once, the horror around him seemed to multiply. Blood pools began growing, spreading around him as though the room were flooding with it, and Eric’s bloodied face lifted, speaking to him as he struggled to stand on torn limbs. More grotesque than that was when his face twisted into a fearsome scowl, teeth elongating and eyes pulsing a bloody red, almost as if...

Almost as if he were some kind of nightmare werewolf.

He advanced on Jensen, and with growing trepidation, the green-eyed boy scrambled backwards. It was an awkward sort of crab-walk, halted only when his palm slipped in a pool of blood; Jensen fought down revulsion when he realized that he was completely covered in blood, his clothes slick with it.

In front of him, Eric’s corpse kept coming. “You should have told me that you were associating with blood-hungry monsters? You should have let me know that you were putting both of our lives in danger? You should have left my home so that I didn’t have to be faced with such a horrific death? What, Jensen? What should you have done?!”

That voice, once filled with soft compassion, was now booming with hatred and disgust. Every word was like a blow to Jensen’s stomach, adding to the already awful nausea he had from seeing the state of the room. Unshed tears tied his throat up in knots, making it harder and harder to take a breath, although even if he could, Jensen wasn’t sure what he would have used it for.

To scream? To sob? To talk, and beg for forgiveness that he knew he didn’t deserve?

Bumping against the wall with nowhere else to go, Jensen helplessly resigned himself to his fate. For all the enemies he could fight against, tangible and not, he had never been able to fight against his father. And this thing, though it obviously wasn’t Eric Kripke anymore, was still something that was wearing his face, and Jensen was too filled with fresh grief and a terrible self-recrimination to fight against it.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed raggedly, everything aching anew as he used up oxygen that he didn’t really have. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

“Oh, baby… please, wake up.”

Jensen’s body tensed, several things making it to his awareness at once. The first, and possibly the only comforting thing, was that he was surrounded by a familiar scent and warmth; one that he knew meant he was safe in Jared’s arms, and not at the horror place his mind had sent him to. The second, was that his mouth was still moving off its own volition, which meant he had been talking in sleep; likely the same repetition of apologies, since it had his boyfriend sounding so wrecked.

The third, and definitely the worst realization, was that it was all real.

A choked sob caught in his throat and instinctively, he curled into a ball in an effort to minimize the awful pain that was ravaging his body. Phantom agony that Jensen knew from experience was ten thousand times worse than any physical affliction coursed through him, reopening familiar wounds and creating new ones too. This was his one moment of weakness – he couldn’t allow himself any more – and he made use of it by clinging onto the arms that Jared slid around him. His boyfriend was
whining softly, obviously hurting at his distress, but Jensen appreciated his presence more than he knew how to convey. For several minutes, he just held on to Jared, eyes shut against the world and all of that goddamn pain.

But he couldn’t hide forever.

Green eyes fluttered open gradually, his entire body tensed with the expected blast of light that never came. He was in Jared’s old bedroom; he knew that immediately because the surroundings were still so familiar to him, no matter how much more often they were at their cottage instead of Jared’s childhood home. Although his body ached dully, it wasn’t nearly at the level of pain he’d expected to feel, which made him believe that Beaver had used his serum thing on Jensen again, healing him with Jared’s blood. At the same time, however, he knew that he hadn’t lost too much time being unconscious, because his middle still stung with every breath and his head still pounded from the concussion he’d had, and his chest ached horribly with the discomfort of burns, which meant that the serum hadn’t been at work for very long.

Couple hours, at most.

Systematically, he began to mount his defenses; first clenching his jaw against the tears that were struggling to make it past his eyelashes, and then tensing his muscles to force himself to an upright position. It was harder to force a blank expression over his features, but years of practice were nothing to scoff at, and after a moment, Jensen managed that, too.

Jared had other ideas. “You need to rest, love,” he murmured, achingly gentle as he tried to coax Jensen back on to the bed. “C’mon, please, you need…”

“I need to make calls,” Jensen interrupted him, voice clear and lucid, if a little dull. He avoided his Alpha’s eyes, instead shrugging off the hand that was cupped over his shoulder. “I need to make preparations,” he added, stubbornly ignoring the flash of hurt that came over Jared’s expression at the brush-off. Jared was just going to have to deal, he was just going to have to understand…

If Jensen allowed himself to indulge in his boyfriend’s comfort for even a second longer than he already had, he was going to shatter.

He couldn’t afford to shatter, not right then, not when everything was so out of balance and turbulent. Jensen knew for a fact that there were things that needed considering, plans that needed making even after the… the funeral. Things about the pack and about the safety of all of their wolves. Things that they needed to think about, as the future Alpha and Beta, and things that Jensen couldn’t be helpful with if he was half out of his mind with grief and guilt and internally directed rage.

Jared scooted closer to him, apparently not understanding. “We can do that in the morning, baby, I’ll help you,” he offered softly, his voice so goddamn soothing and pleading and young. Fuck, but Jared really sounded young in that moment, as though all he wanted in the world was to make Jensen okay, only he had no idea how, and it was tearing him apart.

As much as Jensen wanted to assuage the feeling in his lover, he couldn’t. He just didn’t have anything left in that moment, except for his defenses.

“I have to go, Jared,” he shook his head, tone bordering on curt as he stumbled to his feet, trying to locate his shoes once he realized that he was in a pair of Jared’s sweats and his own wifed ee t. The Alpha immediately got up as well, crossing around the bed and looking like he was going to try to talk Jensen down. But Jensen wasn’t on a ledge, he was just… fortifying his barriers. It was the only way he was going to get through this. He cut Jared off at the knees by holding up a hand. “I’m not in
shock and I’m completely rational,” he stated, strategically injecting a hint of flat impatience into his words. “And I need to go. I’m not going to do anything stupid, but I’m not going to just sit here and wallow and pretend that nothing happened, for the whole fucking night.”

Guilt curled in his stomach, and Jensen knew for a fact that he wasn’t being or speaking fair to his boyfriend, but the alternative was allowing himself to be weak. He’d made that mistake, made it for the past few months, and it had almost gotten himself and others killed on multiple occasions. It had gotten Eric killed, now.

No more weakness. No more being blindsided. No more loss.

Despite his overly harsh words, Jared still approached him, looking like he was trying to soothe a spooked animal. “Baby, you’re hurting,” he murmured, sounding like just saying the words was hurting him just as much. “Just… let me take care of you for a little while, okay, sweetheart?”

“I don’t need to be taken care of.” Even as every fiber ached to disagree, Jensen forced himself to keep an impassive expression.

Finally, Jared just manacled his wrists with his hands, jerking Jensen into his chest. “Let’s just talk about this, love, okay?” he pleaded, using the strength in his muscles to keep Jensen pinned there, and later on, Jensen would blame the panic of an impending breakdown for the cheap shot he made himself take.

“So now you want to talk, huh?” he spat, forcing reticent anger to beat back the crushing wave of agony and despair that was waiting for his defenses to lower long enough to beat him into the ground. He shoved away from his Alpha’s hold. “You didn’t feel like talking earlier, when I begged you to let that stupid Adam thing go, did you? You didn’t feel like talking when I was trying to tell you that something was off! You didn’t feel like fucking talking about anything then, so why do you think I want to talk now?!”

The words had barely left his mouth before crushing guilt made him feel sick to his stomach. Jared looked pale, as though Jensen had stabbed him through the heart, and he might as well have because Jensen didn’t know how on earth he was ever going to make up for the stupid drivel that had just come out of his mouth.

He didn’t deserve to be forgiven for that.

Remorse and regret burned at the pit of his belly, the silence between him and his stricken Alpha deafening. Jensen tried to force an apology through numb lips, to say something, anything about this was his own fault and his own damage, not Jared’s, not at all… but he couldn’t. And maybe it was better if he didn’t, because Jensen seemed to have a knack for killing everyone that ever loved him, just like that stupid fucking nightmare he’d had all those months ago.

Maybe it was better for the pack to steer clear. For Jared to steer clear.

Choking on his own despair at the idea, Jensen forced his uncooperative legs to move, taking quick strides out of Jared’s room, and then out of Jared’s house, and then on the road to where, he wasn’t sure, bare feet be damned.

Jared didn’t stop him.

~*Jared POV*~
As he watched the love of his life walk away from him, it was like he was in one of his worst nightmares, stuck to the ground and unable to do anything except watch as the unthinkable played out in front of him.

When he finally accepted that Jensen wasn’t going to miraculously reappear in his doorway, the Alpha released a shuddering breath that he hadn’t known he was holding. His vision blurred in a second and Jared tried valiantly to swallow down the tears, because what right did he have to be crying right now? He wasn’t the one who’d been orphaned twice in the same lifetime. He wasn’t the one who’d been targeted relentlessly because of who he’d chosen to love.

Jensen wasn’t saying it outright, but Jared knew that this was all his fault.

Well, not so much his fault as the consequence of who he was, but honestly, Jared should have just considered leaving with Jensen back before his mate had even known of the existence of Weres. Once, a long time ago, he’d told himself that he would learn how to live without his Alpha side making an appearance, but he’d been selfish when faced with his love’s acceptance. He’d begun taking and taking and taking in that moment, always remorseful but never really doing anything to stop or cushion the hits that Jensen took in the name of being his mate.

He’d deserved being walked out on.

Jared wasn’t sure how long he’d stayed frozen in place, head bowed as he sat on the edge of his bed, still facing the door as if hoping that it would be opened by his mate against all odds. Because Jared could fix this, he knew he could, he would do whatever it took… by whatever means necessary, he would make it right, he just needed the chance…

When a tentative knock sounded, he jerked upright, but both his sense of smell, keenly attuned to his mate, and also a bit of common sense told him that it wasn’t Jensen at the door. “Yeah?”

“Can I come in?” Megan asked softly, sounding nervous but determined. His first instinct was to turn her away, not wanting his baby sister to have any part in the awful darkness that was touching him and Jensen right now, but Jared knew that it would be a pointless thing. Megan loved them both and last night, when he’d carried his mate inside the house, it’d been his sister who’d made sure that the bed was made up for Jen. It’d been Megan who had cried bitterly when she’d seen Jensen’s injuries and heard that his father had been killed in the attack.

She was already part of it, because she loved them – she loved Jensen – too much not to be.

His voice was hoarse, even after he cleared his throat. “Yeah, Megz, sure.” The door began creaking slowly open even before all the words were out of his mouth, and when a small brunette head popped in through the doorway, the Alpha recognized that his sister was being cautious thinking that Jensen was still asleep. She hadn’t heard anything, then, that had transpired… hours ago? He blinked when he noticed the weak sunlight streaming through the drawn drapes in his bedroom.

“Where’s Jen?” Megan asked plaintively, a puzzled frown forming on her face as she stepped fully into the room, abandoning any attempt at being quiet. “I didn’t hear anyone going into the bathroom.”

Jared’s throat closed up but he forced himself to speak through it. “He, uh… he left. Late last night, or early this morning… I didn’t really check the time. Whenever he woke up.” After he had helplessly begun sobbing apologies. After he had relived awful horrors with Jared helpless to do
anything but try to rouse him gently. After he had curled up into the Alpha for a few minutes, clutching on to him while those awful, broken little sounds ripped from his throat.

But Megan didn’t need to know all that.

“And you just let him go?!” His sister went from concerned confusion to anger so abruptly that it made Jared blink slightly in surprise. “Jesus, Jared, what the hell’s the matter with you?” Her tone made him wince, but Megan didn’t seem to be feeling particularly gracious because she just pressed on. “Your mate needs you, and you just let him—…”

“I don’t think he needs me, Meg, I think he needs the opposite of that, okay?” he cut her off, an odd mix of weary and sharp. Because he knew that she was acting out of worry, he forced himself to soften his voice. It wasn’t fair to snap when she didn’t even know what was going on. “He’s… upset. Understandably so. I think he needs some space from me, since…” The words cut his throat like they were blades but Jared was determined not to take any more from Jensen than he already had. “You wouldn’t understand, Meg.”

Megan sighed gustily and came to sit next to him. For a moment, she said nothing. Her hand rubbed light circles against his hunched back and to her credit, she waited until he relaxed a fraction before she started talking. “You’re right, Jared,” she agreed softly. “I don’t understand. I don’t understand, and neither do you, because we’ve been lucky enough to never know the feeling of losing a parent. Jensen, on the other hand, just lost a fourth. Neither of us could possibly understand that kind of grief and loss… but what I do understand, is that grief tears people inside out. Whatever happened to make you stay here instead of going after your hurting mate? You can’t hold that against him, Jare, you gotta let him get that stuff out of his system.”

“But he didn’t say anything that wasn’t true, Meg;” the Alpha shook his head, burying his hands in his hair. “Everything he said…”

“You’re projecting,” she interrupted him, and her voice had sharpened a little again with impatience. “Did you ever think that maybe Jensen targeted exactly what you needed to hear so that you don’t come after him? So that you don’t have to watch him self-destruct? Did you even feel any resentment from him over your bond?”

Jared thought back to the moment that he felt he had lost his mate. He’d been trying to urge Jensen into a hug, thinking that his lover needed to break and wanting to hold him together while he did, but… Jensen was hardly a typical person. He was strong and fierce, and it took a hell of a lot for him to break. This would do it, but what if his mate thought he had to stand that alone? Because who else had been there for him the other three times it had happened?

And no. He hadn’t felt any anger directed towards him from Jensen, not even now. All he could feel was intense anguish, and knowing that it was only a fraction of his mate’s feelings, Jared hardly knew how his lover was still functioning.

He was an idiot.

Standing abruptly, Jared paced a little, torn viciously between his instinct to take off running to wherever his mate was, and that little shred of uncertainty that was keeping him from doing just that. Whether or not Jensen was angry didn’t change the fact that all of this could have been avoided if Jared had simply listened to what his mate had been trying to say, instead of rushing off to exact some form of street justice on Adam. That was still on his head and fuck, how was Jared supposed to apologize for that, exactly?

It doesn’t matter, he realized in the next breath. Because whatever gets thrown at me while I’m
figuring it out, I can take, long as he’s not left alone in his grief.

That was really all it came down to. Making sure that his mate wasn’t ever alone in his pain, not ever again. Jared didn’t have the power to change the kind of awful, heartbreaking past that Jensen had been privy to, but he had the power to make certain of the fact that history would never repeat itself.

Brusquely, he nodded to himself and came to sit next to Megan again, grabbing the shoes at the foot of his bed and pulling them on. “You’re right,” he told her needlessly, sensing more than seeing it when his little sister adopted a faintly smug smile. “I can’t let him go through this alone.”

“A wise conclusion that I’m so proud of you for coming to all on your own.”

He spared her a brief grin. “You’re spending too much time with Jensen,” he commented with a shake of his head, because he knew quite well that his sister hadn’t been nearly so sarcastic and dry before his mate had begun spending time with her. He ruffled her hair as he stood up.

“Bring him home, Jare,” Megan said suddenly, and her voice was small, reminiscent of the little pup he’d grown up with. That, more than anything, told him exactly how much his sister loved his mate. He could hear the pain that she felt for him, and in any other circumstance, it would have warmed his heart to know that Jensen was so accepted and loved in the Padalecki family. “Remind him that he hasn’t lost everything, not this time around.”

Impulsively, he pulled the young beta into a hug, dropping a kiss to the top of her head when she clung to him. “You got it, Megz.”

~*Jensen*~

Jensen almost wished that the house was still full of blood and broken furniture. The very least punishment he deserved was to be forced to clean the evidence of the carnage that had been wrought through his own decisions and short-sightedness.

But alas, as he stood in the doorway of his room, Jensen couldn’t see even a droplet of the blood that had painted its walls no more than a few hours ago. He could only guess that some of the wolves in the pack had been on clean-up duty because the wrecked furniture had also been cleared out, leaving behind only his bed, dresser and a few other knickknacks that had survived the devastation.

He couldn’t bring himself to go any further than the doorway; it made the artist wonder how he would have managed cleaning up on his own, punishment or not, and he decided in that moment that he owed whoever had done it for him in a big way. Honestly, Jensen wasn’t sure that he would ever be able to walk into that room again.

Not without being reminded of Erik’s prone corpse lying in a veritable sea of blood.

The thought had no sooner crossed his mind before Jensen found himself on his knees hugging the toilet, dry heaving as his stomach rebelled against nothing. It was a few minutes before he could stop, tears mixing with sweat as he stumbled into the hall and made it as far as the staircase before curling into a miserable ball on the top step. Grief slammed into him all over again, flaying him raw as he fought to keep from crying. Gripped tufts of his hair in his fists just so he had a different pain to focus on. Anything so that he didn’t give into the agony, because once he did…

…once he did, there would be no stopping it.
It was in that same position, some indeterminate amount of time later, when Chris found him. His best friend was at his side in just a few strides, steps taken two and three at a time, an arm winding around his shoulder and pulling him into a hug without words.

Somehow, it was precisely what Jensen needed.

For a few minutes they just sat there, Chris hugging him tight enough to hold him together and Jensen clinging on like the other boy was the only thing keeping him from going adrift at sea. It was easier to retain his grip on composure around Kane than it was around Jared, because the latter had a knack for stripping away all of Jensen’s walls and defenses. Chris, on the other hand, allowed him to fake it till he made it, so to speak.

“Thought you were going to be at Jared’s,” Kane eventually said, voice low and gently curious.

Pulling away slowly, green eyes flickered briefly shut as Jensen rubbed his temples. “Not a good idea right now,” was all he said in response, pointedly not elaborating.

Just how exactly could he explain that Jared had the ability to render him defenseless against his own explosive grief? And explain that Jensen wasn’t totally sure of his own capacity to be put back together in the aftermath of that?

Easy. He didn’t.

Being the best friend that he was, Chris took the not-so-subtle hint for what it was and dutifully kept quiet, only speaking again as he followed Jensen when the future Beta dragged himself to his feet and trudged down the stairs.

“Come to our place, then,” the alpha suggested quietly as Jensen flipped the light in the kitchen on and began rummaging through drawers with the least amount of grace he could conceivably manage. Over the clutter and clang as Jen tossed around duct tape and super glue and buttons and – what the fuck were they doing with a remote control to what looked like a mechanized gate? – Chris tried to gently point out, “You need to get some rest, man.”

Jensen threw the drawer shut with restrained aggression that he hoped his best friend knew wasn’t directed at him. “I don’t need rest. I need his old address book. I need to call people when it gets light out.” Distracted as he was by the notion, green eyes flicked towards the clock that hung above the breakfast nook. “What are you doing out here anyway? It’s almost 2am.”

“I hadn’t really left yet,” Chris admitted lightly. “I went to dump the last of the dirt and was coming back to try and board up the front door when I heard you.”

The matter-of-fact tone combined with the little shrug that Kane gave told Jensen volumes more than his best friend might have, if left to his own devices. Another lump joined the one that seemed permanently stuck in his throat since he woke up and Jensen couldn’t help briefly wondering what on earth he could have possibly done in this lifetime or the last to deserve the people he had.

Without preamble, he drew his best friend into a tight hug. “Go home, brother,” he muttered, voice a little gruff as he strained to keep from showing how much it felt like he was going to rip apart at the seams. “Go be with Soph and Tessa and don’t you dare come back here, okay?”

Just as Jensen had understood without asking, exactly how hard it had to have been for Chris to be in the middle of the destruction so reminiscent of his own past trauma, the alpha also understood that his future Beta wasn’t pushing him away; simply taking back his position and trying to protect Chris. Protect him from the memories of the horror that they were now forced to share.
Jensen should have known better, though. They had, after all, been brothers before they had become pack.

“M’not leaving you here alone with this, Freckles,” Chris stated quietly, his conviction present in the burning blue of his eyes. In his own show of stubbornness, the alpha trampled to the other side of the kitchen, opening up another drawer with decidedly less force than Jensen had used. “Now. What does this address book look like?”

~*Micky*~

From his position, Mikhail Ozera scanned the darkness outside through the window. He knew, maybe better than most, exactly the kind of dangers and perils that hid in the unassuming night, and unlike the rest of his extended family, Micky knew that it was only wise to exercise the kind of caution he had, over the years.

Caution was the reason that he was… and they… and Jensen…

A world weary sigh slipped from his lips at the thought of his pseudo-nephew. Concern and fear churned his gut, making him wish more than anything that he could throw all those years of caution to the wind and just keep driving until he found the kid’s house.

But then, he was never as brave as some others he knew.

“Madz, honey, maybe this is a mistake,” he muttered, torment clear in his voice as he thought of the part that he was playing in Jensen’s sorrow and pain. “Nobody was supposed to die from all this. Jensen was never supposed to be in the position he was in today.”

Logically, he knew that the only fault he had in this whole thing, was keeping secrets from his Shamanic student. But wasn’t that bad enough? If he just told Jensen the truth, told him everything, then wouldn’t that give him a chance to prepare for the future? To mount a defense, at least?

Before she could say anything, Micky impatiently continued, running an agitated hand through his hair. “I know, I know… if we tell him any more than he already knows, we could be jeopardizing the integrity of the Treaty. But it feels wrong, Maddie, it feels like I’m setting him up for more pain.”

*Because you are,* a voice in his head accused faintly, sounding as disgusted with him as he felt with himself in that moment. *You’re standing idly by and watching everything unfold even knowing what you know. Knowing the pain he will go through. All for one person.*

But wasn’t that the meaning of love? Forsaking everything and everyone when the one you loved needed you? And he loved her. By the Gods, did he love her.

“Forgive me, my old friend,” Mikhail whispered regretfully under his breath, closing his eyes as he pictured the smiling face of his best friend. Sean Ackles would have been the furthest from smiling if Micky had the courage or the power to establish a connection with him, he knew. But what Micky was doing was for the greater good. It was for the long run. One day, Sean and Jensen both would understand.

Turning around to face the love of his life, Micky swallowed back another sigh. “Alright, Madz,” he nodded slightly, trying to clear his mind. “Let’s get cracking, huh? There isn’t much time now, until all of this is over.”
Chapter End Notes

Anyone catch the little seed I planted? XD <3

Thank you so much for reading, and to those who are still sticking with me, thank you so much! You're all amazing and the reason that I haven't ever forgotten or given up on this story, even at my lowest.

Hope to post sooner rather than later!

Love you all!

J <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!