Life on Mars
by HermineKurotowa

Summary

Jared would never have thought it was possible to find a soul mate in a state-owned brothel, but when he does, it will turn everyone's world upside down. But it's common knowledge that soul mates happen for a reason.

Notes

Written for the spn_j2_bigbang. Thank yous need to be said to the amazing wendy for running this challenge year after year; to my wonderful beta jj1564 (you know I love you, right?); and to my lovely alpha junkerin. (I think this makes me the omega.) All remaining mistakes are my own, and I'm going to keep them.

I don't know how I deserve the awesome artists that continue to choose my little fics; this year it's thruterryseyes who took a fancy to my story and made the most brilliant art I could ever hope for. It still blows me away every time I look at it.

This was also written for this prompt at the spnkink_meme. I'm very sorry that it's possibly not what the prompter had in mind, but my muse ran away with the prompt and didn't give it back. *sighs*
Prologue

He remembers only in nightmares.

Though there were people who tried to help, there were even more who made his young life hell. He was old enough to actually recall the beatings, the taunting and hunger, but his mind disposed of those memories. It is only when he is unconscious that the recollections are dug out from where they’re hidden deep down behind closed doors.

Instead, he gazes at the stars whenever he is able to skulk off.

“It's cold up here,” Osric says and sits down at his side.

Jared is leaning back, putting his weight on his elbows, but says nothing. He is not the kind of guy that talks much and usually, his assignments don't contain talking when he has to use his mouth for other things.

After a few moments of blessed silence under the stars, Osric says, “The director is looking for you.” Jared nods his head, drawing in a deep breath that borders a sigh, and gets up.
Limping down the narrow stairs from the roof is not easy. There is no light, but Jared knows the way, where to put his feet in order not to fall down the stairs.

The Jubilation Institute for Constructive Recreation is placed in a fanciful replica of a French chateau. The interior design is a crude mishmash of faux Louis XIV and art nouveau. Some rooms are furnished in a contemporary design, others are draped in red velvet and black leather. There is even one room in the attic that looks like a forest with murals and plastic trees in case one of the patrons wants to go outside while staying inside.

Jared doesn't know when the Institute was built, but he thinks it has been at least two hundred years, when there still was a king and an alpha royalty. The squiggled décor is just proof that being rich and powerful doesn't guarantee a sense of taste.

He limps down the stairs past the tree room, the tea kitchen on the second floor, that the hosts are not allowed to enter, and the lobby on the first floor. He limps past the short hallway leading off the lobby to the director's office.

The door is standing ajar; nevertheless, Jared knocks.

"Where've you been?" the director barks, tearing the door open, and continues, "I don't care; you know what to do."

Jared ducks his head and limps as slowly as he dares through the office and the door on its left side into Director Pileggi's apartment.

Compared to his predecessor, Pileggi is a decent man. He allows Jared to rest after especially exhausting and painful sessions, and he isn't punished for breathing too loud. He is even fed regularly.

Pileggi keeps his finger nails short so he doesn't scratch Jared when he chokes him.

The last four years have been almost nice.

Jared keeps his eyes shut. He doesn't want to see the man, who moves inside him in painful thrusts – too little lube, it is always too little, but that is what he is here for – and fortunately, the director doesn't force him to watch.

It also helps with taking breaths. The fingers around his throat aren't grabbing too tight yet so he still gets enough air to not get lightheaded, but he knows that soon, they will constrict his breathing so much so that he could pass out.

Pileggi is grunting and moaning; his erratic thrusts indicate that something odd is happening that Jared hasn't noticed before in the effort to relieve the strain on his shoulders and arms. The cuffs fettering him to the headboard don't budge though.

Usually, Pileggi watches out for Jared to not pass out completely, to just teeter on the brink of consciousness. This time though, the director's body is tensing, his fingers clenching too tight in spasms around Jared's throat.

He thrashes on the sheets for fear of suffocating, tries to buck off the heavy weight of a dying man, but too soon, darkness creeps in.
Chapter 1

Jensen thinks of himself as a decent man.

He is a hard worker, an honest man and a good son. He never treated an omega badly, mostly because he kept sufficient distance, but the point is that he can turn a blind eye on the omegas’ shortcomings. He'll just have to make the best of a house full of hysterical wimps.

He didn't scramble to get the job. The assignment was unexpected, even more that it was Senator Morgan himself who instructed him.

Thank the Alpha, it is only over an interim period until a new director is found. All these omegas, their smell permeating the building, make his hackles rise.

The gangly, pale and malnourished boy who stands in front of him in the middle of the office is setting a good example. His posture is slumped, thumbs rubbing unconsciously over the linen pants’ seam. His scent is kind of penetrative, slowly soaking through Jensen's pores and making him want
to scratch his skin.

There is one word to describe this person: weak.

“Well... Jared,” Jensen needs to look up the name in the files since something is making him lose his train of thought. “You were with the highly-valued Director Pileggi when he... died.”

Maybe there is the tiniest nod of the boy's head. Could also be a shiver though.

“Well? Speak up!”

AAAAAAA

Jared feels weird. There is a new, unknown smell in this room that makes him almost dizzy, but it could be down to the lack of food. During the last days, Curator Rhodes was of the opinion that a director's murderer didn't need to eat. If it wasn't for Osric sneaking him some bread and apples, Jared would have been starved by now.

The new director's voice is nice, gravelly and low. Its waves make his head buzz.

He wants to know if Jared was there when... that night. Of course he was, it is all in that file on the desk. His whole long life of nineteen years is there, between thin cardboard sheets.

“Speak up!” the director snaps, and Jared flinches.

“Yes, sir,” Jared whispers, “I was with him.”

He was there the whole night, stuck under a slowly cooling body, until they found the very dead director in the morning.

“Did you know he had a heart condition?”

“No, sir. I knew he took meds, but not the reason.”

“Did you call for help?”

Jared shakes his head.

“Why not?”

After a minute of contemplation Jared shrugs a shoulder. It would have been in vain; no one ever listens to a host screaming and yelling, and besides, the director's apartment is mostly soundproof. In Jared's defense, he tried calling nevertheless, but all he could do was croak. Due to the choking, his voice was ruined and Pileggi's dead weight pressing down on his chest and lungs didn't help either.

Ackles looks peeved. Jared wants to tell him that it wasn't his fault, that he really tried to get free from the handcuffs and get help, but he knows when it is better to keep his mouth shut. He learned that lesson the hard way.
“It says here that you've been in a solitary cell for four days. Do you think that's a condign punishment?”

Jared tilts his head. Never has anybody asked what he thought about punishment and really wanted to know. Are four days and nights in a tiny cell enough where there is no light and no time, but only hunger and one's own thoughts? He is glad there is the spoon in the cell and even gladder no one took it away yet.

What is the correct answer?

*Yes, sir, I think four days in the dark with no food is enough punishment for something I couldn't either prevent nor control. Or maybe, No, sir, I think there's never enough pain and hurt in the world to keep you alpha bastards satisfied, no matter what I do.*

So he says, “Whatever you think appropriate, sir.”

It is the standard reply that already kept him alive for too many years.

He dares to gaze at the new director under his bangs and sees confusion, maybe repulsion written on the handsome face. There are freckles all over the bridge of his nose and cheeks, and every single one of them screams *you stupid little fuck.*

That is what he his, the reality of his life: he is of no use other than to be fucked. Being deprived of his choice of having offspring – and with his body not being able to lubricate – he is not even a full omega.

Omegas may be stupid and weak in general, but this one is especially dumb. At least he seems to be dumb enough not to understand the questions Jensen asks. His replies consist of shrugging and mumbling, his eyes cast to the floor.

Apparently though, he seems to be good enough to cut vegetables since he used to work in the kitchen.

Jensen re-assigns him for kitchen duty and makes a note for Curator Rhodes. She is not only the estate's administrator, but also performs partly as Jensen's secretary. She seems to be a very capable beta; however, Jensen thinks about hiring a secretary to lighten her workload.

The omega's chores should be manageable even with his clearly visible limp. Jensen believes that everyone needs to work for their food, he certainly won't encourage idleness.

The next host he interviews is an omega of Asian heritage. He is of slight build and seems to be far less dumb than this other omega, Paladecki.

“What kind of name is Osric?” Jensen asks.

“Director Morgan couldn't pronounce my given name so he called me Osric, sir,” the little omega
Oh yes, Jensen remembers Senator Morgan mentioning a dog named Osric he owned when he was a boy. It was nice to name the omega after a pet the senator obviously cared for at that time.

“What do you know about Director Pileggi's death?”

“Uhm... he was sick, but nobody knew,” Osric replies, “and when he was, uh, overexerting himself physically, his heart ceased to beat.”

“What do you mean, 'overexerting himself physically'? Did he do workout?”

“In a way he did. Uhm. He was with Jared.”

“I know that,” Jensen says impatiently.

The omega seems to be embarrassed, scraping his foot on the carpet. “Director Pileggi didn't do sports, sir. His recreational activities contained, um, some bondage, preferably handcuffs.”

Jensen stares unbelieving. “What are you saying? Are you badmouthing the director?”

“No, sir, I wouldn't dare.” He raises his hands in a defensive gesture. “Ask the management. The director never hid the fact he used cuffs and ropes on Jared; everyone knew it, though Jared never said one word about it.”

If this is true – and there is no reason for Jensen to not believe it – it is disgusting. Pileggi exploited his position, and who knows who else is still abusing the trust the theocracy places in them.

“So when you say,” Jensen clears his throat just to have a moment longer to collect his thoughts, “Jared was with Director Pileggi, you're insinuating that both of them had non-sanctioned intercourse.”

Osric blinks. “I don't insinuate, sir, I say it right out. Director Pileggi has had sex with Jared the night he died. He cuffed him to the headboard and the poor guy was trapped underneath him until they found him in the morning.”

After he dismisses the omega, Jensen needs a few minutes. He is pretty impressed by the little man who doesn't mince words if he has to. What the omega told him puts a new complexion on Paladecki’s behavior.

Maybe it is time to have a talk with the institute's physician.

“You don't look so good,” Osric says.

Jared cracks an eye open. The world is too bright today. Also, it is too loud and too heavy. He is on his bed in the dormitory and right now, he could kill Osric for drawing the blanket aside.
“Are you skipping work?” his friend asks.

“Leave me ’lone,” Jared murmurs.

“Did you eat anything today?”

Groaning Jared puts the pillow over his head and burrows his face in the lumpy mattress.

“Okay,” Osric says emphatically, “I’ll get you something to eat, maybe some coffee.”

*Oh Alpha, coffee!* That would be great.

When Osric starts to leave for the kitchen though, Jared's hand darts from under the pillow, seizing his wrist.

“What do you think about the new director?” Jared asks

“I don’t know... Kitty says he's cute, but I think he's dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” That word never connected with the director in Jared's mind. “In what way?”

“Miss Rhodes mentioned he's one of the Dallas Ackles. They're ultraconservative, which more than likely means that life is going to get harder.”

“You think?” Jared asks doubtingly.

Osric nods confidently. “Most Ackles are clerics. They only breed alphas and abandon babies of other sexes. They believe in the survival of the strongest and I tell you, Jared, the director knows his Book.”

He pats Jared's hand and turns to leave when his wrist is set free.

“I’d keep an eye on him,” Osric says, “know your enemy, Jared!”

Jared rolls onto his back, staring up the damp-stained ceiling.

He can't believe that Director Ackles is an enemy. That is definitely not the word he is thinking of when he thinks of the man. Mostly though there is just a buzzing through his head and he is unable to ponder over it for any length of time.

He thinks about the distaste and contempt that were written on that face, that handsome face with green eyes and freckles the color of cinnamon.

Jared wonders if these little spots taste like cinnamon since there was a scent like it wafting through the room that made him reminisce about his mom. She liked to bake pies, preferably apple with cinnamon, and buns. Whenever Jared thought about that spice, he thought *home.*

Now he is lying in his bed with the biggest erection he's had since he doesn't know when, thinking about Director Ackles, who makes him think about cinnamon and *home.*
Mark Sheppard M.D. may be a capable physician, but his work ethics leave much to be desired. Jensen has already worked for several hours and interviewed five hosts, when the doctor enters the building and, shortly after, his office.

He doesn't look much like an alpha with his shortness and receding hairline. He greets Jensen rousingly and after some small talk, Jensen comes down to business.

“Jared?” Sheppard asks thoughtfully. “He's a little troublemaker.”

That is surprising. Raising an eyebrow, Jensen assures himself, “A troublemaker?”

“Yes. That's what brought him here in the first place. Also, he lies and seeks attention. He uses hunger strikes as leverage, that's why he's so scrawny. We need to have him on vitamins constantly, in addition to his mandatory contraceptives. I must admit though that he got better in the past year or so.”

“Hmm,” Jensen hums non-committedly.

“I think it's best to ignore him as effectively as possible. I found him more complacent after he realized his tantrums came to nothing.”

“All right, Doctor. I put him on kitchen duty; let's see what happens.”

Jensen offers butterscotch that Sheppard declines politely. He puts the box down on his desk and raises the next topic.

“Tell me, doctor, how did he hurt his leg?”

The physician thinks a minute. “Oh, you mean the limp he’s sporting? It was a work accident,” he says, “he fell down the stairs and hurt his hip. It's going to take some time, but he'll make a full recovery eventually.”

“That's good,” Jensen says nodding.

Then they talk about the duty roster in the infirmary and Sheppard complains about being understaffed. Jensen has a hunch this is a frequent complaint, but he can't see how one physician and two nurses means being understaffed. After all, there are only thirty-five public servers in the institute; how many injuries can there be on a daily basis?

Strictly speaking they've finished talking – Sheppard already turned to leave – when Jensen stops him with a last question.

“Doctor, why did you put Jared in a solitary cell after Pileggi died? It wasn't his fault and as it looks like, he couldn't do a thing to help?”

Sheppard blinks, somewhat taken by surprise, then replies, “I'm not a counselor, sir. I already said years ago, when Senator Morgan was this institute's director, that we're in need of a counselor. When we found poor Jared that morning, he was completely out of it. I had to sedate him and put him under suicide watch. The solitary cell was the only place where we could keep a very close eye on him. He's better now, but it was a few hard days for him.”

“I can imagine,” Jensen mutters. Then he says more loudly, “Thank you for your time, Doctor. Don’t let me keep you.”
After Sheppard leaves to carry out his duty in the infirmary, Jensen eats butterscotch and looks at Jared's picture in his file. He is a handsome boy, but since the picture is only black and white, he can't determine the eye color.

That is too bad; Jensen would love to know whether the omega's eyes are brown. He thinks due to Jared's brown hair, his eyes are certainly brown, too. Or maybe hazel. It is a pity he couldn't see them because of his bangs. The boy always kept his head bowed, merely glancing at him.

The past two weeks were almost the happiest in Jared's life – well, at least of the past couple of years.

After having done his duty as a host in the evening and night, he sleeps for a few hours; then he goes to the kitchen to help the cook.

Misha Collins is the nicest alpha Jared ever met and the reason to not give up on alphahood. He treats everyone the same, being pleasant and never scoffing or yelling at anyone. When he learns that Jared already worked under his predecessor, he immediately assigns him some special tasks, teasing out all of his considerable work experience.

He puts Jared in charge of lunch and afternoon snack, and when he suggests buffet instead of eating in shifts, Misha is amazed, looking at Jared with wide eyes.

“That's the most brilliant idea I've ever heard”, he says and Jared is blushing like the virgin he hasn't been for a long time.

Now Jared is responsible for arranging and calculating buffets for breakfast, lunch and dinner and in-between meals. Misha expects Jared to give him elaborate proposals and trusts him completely.

Then Osric tells him an incredible story when they eat lunch in a corner of the kitchen.

“I couldn't think of anything I did wrong”, Osric says, flourishing the sandwich in his hands. “I thought he'd sell me to a non-governmental or something.”

Jared nods. “Yeah, I saw you standing in front of the office this morning.”

“You won't believe me. I wouldn't believe it myself if it wasn't-”

“Osric!”

“Okay, sorry!” Osric puts the sandwich back onto his plate and leans forward in order to give weight to his words. “He wants me as his secretary.”

“What! No way!”

“Yes!” Osric nods enthusiastically. “He said he wanted to take some workload off Rhodes and had me write some letters and file documents. It was like trial work, I tell you.”
Jared laughs, shaking his head. “Dude, no way Ackles wants you to be his secretary. He's fooling you!”

“But I got the job. Jared, brother, I have an honest-to-goodness job!”

This is an Osric Jared experiences very rarely – he is bright-eyed, seems to be livelier. This is the boy who came to the institute four years ago.

“What do you think, why did he do this?” Jared ponders.

“I don't care! I have a job!”

This is the thing Jared thinks about for the rest of the day. Why did the director engage Osric, what is his agenda?

There have been strange things happening since Ackles took charge. Daphne was released though she was the beta who got booked most often; Ackles said she had served her sentence and released her, just because. He fired Warden Speight who embezzled anything he could convert into cash. And now the thing with Osric...

He thinks about Ackles during the first couple of hours of work, which tonight is only two blow jobs and one vanilla fuck before he asks for a break. His throat is raw and he just needs a cool drink.

In a corner of the dining hall, there is a drinking fountain providing water around the clock. Considering the hosts' working hours, it is nice to be able to have a drink in the dead of night. Sometimes at an unalphaly hour, there is a whole bunch of hosts gathering around the fountain and stealing a few minutes off work, some of them bemoaning the lack of smokes.

The water running down Jared's throat is cool and delicious. His back is aching and his butt is sore; the last patron was pretty vanilla, but he definitely used too little lube. Unfortunately, most of the patrons demanding for Jared want him for the lube they don't want to use on him.

That is so fucked up.

A weird feeling is creeping all over Jared's back. Straightening himself, he wipes the water from his chin and looks around.

The scent of cinnamon hits him the same moment he sees the director who stands in the semi-darkness near the door leading to the kitchen.

Jared freezes. He can't imagine what Ackles may want late in the evening; certainly he wouldn't raid the fridge. He seems to be a decent man, but decency only lasts until one can get away with a free fuck.

“Good evening,” Ackles says, his voice sending shivers down Jared's spine.

After too long a moment, Jared replies, “Evening. Can I help you, sir?”

“Um, you work in the kitchen, don't you? I told the cook to buy some butterscotch, but I can't find them. Do you know where they are? Maybe?”

He is here because of candy?

“Misha ordered them, but they'll be delivered only tomorrow.”

“Oh.” The director, grown man that he is, looks like a sad, disappointed five-year-old.
He turns to leave, but Jared says, “If you want... I can make some... butterscotch, I mean. If you want.”

Damn if he knows why he did it.

Jensen needs some sugar.

He has had a day from hell and his emergency candy stash is empty. Wandering and searching the kitchen doesn't help if you don't know where the cook keeps the sweets.

He is halfway through the stack of files he wants to peruse, and the life stories in there are too depressing to bear without butterscotch.

The first file that caught his eye the other day was a young girl's of Jensen's age. When she was fifteen, her drunk friend crashed into another car. It was only a fender bender, nobody got hurt, but they sentenced the girl to public service.

Ten years for some dents. Jensen would bet his life on it that the other car was owned by an alpha.

He always knew that the system favored alphas, but what he found in these files – it is outrageous. It may only concern omegas and low-class betas, but ten years of service for a collision... That is not conforming to Alpha's Will.

He still remembers an occurrence at college. An alpha boy – drunk, of course – crashed into a garden fence. He got off with a slap on the wrist and then sued the omega for compensation since their fence damaged his car.

And then there are the thefts and embezzlements inside the staff he has to grapple with; Jensen already had to fire one of the wardens. They seem to think of the Institute as a kind of self-service shop.

Jensen can't believe that the omega he comes across – Jared who is not as thin any longer as he was a couple of weeks before – is able to make butterscotch.

“You really can make it here, in the kitchen?” he asks incredulously and Jared's retorting smile in the faint light of the dining hall is too sweet.

“Of course,” he says, tilting his head and looking shy, “it's pretty easy. I just need to take my break.”

But Jensen wants none of it; if Jared helps him out with his sugar craving, he won't do it in his downtime. It takes just a short call to the warden on duty and Jared is excused from work.

Jared fetches cream and butter from the fridge, some kind of seasoning and sugar from the pantry, and begins making butterscotch.

Jensen never cared about the way his meals were prepared. Growing up, there was a cook and a couple of kitchen assistants and the only important thing was the cookie jar brimming. Then in
college and during the year in Europe, when he had to look after himself, he basically lived off sandwiches and mac and cheese.

Joining Senator Morgan's staff meant better food since the churchman cares for his employees and makes a cafeteria available.

Now he is watching how his favorite treat is being made, and the sure-fingered way the omega works is fascinating; there is nothing left of the feeble boy who stood in his office a couple of weeks ago.

Scents of butter and sugar are wrapping him in, closely followed by the scent of vanilla. Jared is measuring and stirring, and finally, there is a brownish mixture on a plate that he cuts in pieces.

“You can taste it now,” Jared says, pushing the plate in front of Jensen and looking nervous.

Tentatively, Jensen puts a morsel in his mouth.

It is hard, though simultaneously kind of melting, tasting of cream and vanilla, and it is the best fucking thing he ever had in his mouth.

Maybe he said this out loud because Jared ducks his head smiling.

“I can make toffee too if you want it softer,” he says shyly.

“It's perfect. But I want to taste your toffee next time.” Jensen says and, after stuffing another piece of candy in his mouth, he holds one morsel against Jared's lips. “Here, have a taste yourself.”

Still smiling, Jared opens his lips and sucks the treat in.

His soft, slightly wet lips brush against Jensen's finger tips, and both men freeze.
Chapter 2

Alpha created Males and Females as alphas and betas. But when Demon became jealous and whispered rebellion into their ears, it was the weaker alpha who listened to the suggestions. Alpha was sad and said, “You are not worthy of being an alpha thus you will not be an alpha any longer. Your fate is to serve your alpha and bear their children. You will be omega to their alpha. You will only find Redemption in finding your soul mate; they will make you whole in giving you the strength you are lacking.”

If Jensen only knew what had happened last night...

He searches for answers in his battered copy of the Book, but all he can see is Jared's name between the Alpha's Commandments.

Believe in Alpha, then Alpha will believe in you.

That is the problem – Jensen always believed he would mate a handsome, powerful alpha or maybe
a strong beta, but he never thought he could be interested in an omega. Even if Jared's tall appearance is not typically omega, he would never be the type that draws Jensen's attention, being too thin and gangly.

He thinks about his father who is a senator in Washington, A.C.

William Ackles is tough as nails, a proud alpha descending from a long line of proud alphas. He would never have mated a beta born from an omega if it hadn't been for a soul mateship.

*You can't deny your soul mate*, Jensen's mom says whenever conversations get onto the subject of the unlikely union. She is the perfect balance for her austere and easily irritated mate, but it is not easy to see from the outside. Even Jensen only noticed in his teens that his mother was not being subdued by her mate, but was naturally reserved and subdued in company.

It was she who urged his father to let Jensen go on a tour of Europe for a whole year with the sole purpose of learning about the continent. It was she who knew better than Jensen that he needed to do it, and he still appreciates it.

He visited countries where sexes are equal and omegas are allowed to work after mating, and others where betas and omegas have to wear long dark robes in public.

When he came back home, his father had gone... softer. He played often with his first grandchild, a cute, chubby-faced baby boy who recognizably was an omega even only six months old. *He's not an omega, he's a kid*, Jensen's dad said and his mom smiled leniently and knowingly.

The little one makes Jensen uncomfortable. He loves him truly, but he is destined to mate and bear children, a sensitive human, easy to hurt. He won't have the same chances in life as alpha boys and the sad thing is that he will put up with his situation, being naturally submissive and contenting himself with little.

This is not what Jensen asks of his own life. He is not overly ambitious, but his path through life will lead to a senator's seat in the end. He wants to be important, to be able to change things for the better, and working for Senator Morgan at the young age of twenty-four... can there be a better stepping stone?

So is it possible that Jensen Ackles is attracted to an omega?

Even if he was, he would never act on it. Jared is a petty criminal. It doesn't matter if he only committed a minor offense; when he got sentenced to public service, it certainly was bad enough to deserve it. A relationship, even only a fling, with a convicted criminal would be poisonous for Jensen's career. Furthermore, Jared is a ward of the state; Jensen would never exploit his position, not in the way Pileggi did.

He still doesn't know exactly what his predecessor did, but he certainly had no serious relationship with the omega. Admittedly, he can acknowledge that Jared may be appealing to certain men, but he certainly isn't Jensen's type.

Why is it though that he can't get those long nimble fingers out of his mind?
If Jared only knew what had happened last night...

He is too distracted to pay much attention to his work in the kitchen today and already cut himself twice. Misha eyes him warily, obviously feeling there is something cooking – pun not intended.

Jared would tell him if he knew himself what is going on. He could use some profound advice and Osric probably couldn't give one, being an omega and this being a problem with an alpha.

But – is it a problem? It had been nice, stirring the sugar mixture and waiting for its consistency to change, and the director was stood next to him, emanating that sweet scent that made Jared associate Ackles with home.

Along with these strange feelings emerge thoughts about a family of his own, but he knows of course that these dreams are lies. He lived half his life in a public institution; what sane alpha would mate him? What beta would want an orphaned criminal?

And after the contraceptives stopped working, being a single dad isn't anything he wants for his child as long as they have to live in this world of oppression and bigotry.

Whenever he sits in the dark in solitary confinement and thinks about his parents and the little house with the garden, he has to bash his head against the wall to smother the appetite of belonging to someone. Then he mourns the loss of his family, past and future.

He is carving vegetables into little flowers instead of cutting them into cubes when a shadow darkens the light. Jared looks up.

“What did you tell the director?” the doctor hisses angrily in a low voice.

“I don't know...” Jared says confused, “anything, I didn't tell him anything.”

“Ackles ordered your medical record up. Why? What did you tell him to make him do this?”

Jared shakes his head. “I didn't tell him anything, I don't know what you mean.”

“I'm trying to save your life, Jared!” Sheppard says urgently. “What do you think, how long will you survive if Ackles keeps on looking into your case? You're a small, insignificant omega; no one will shed a tear over you. You know that, don't you?”

“Yes, sir,” Jared replies, lowering his eyes.

With a last meaningful look Sheppard leaves Jared to do his chores that he is not able to get done.

Jared is shaking; what did he do?

What did Sheppard want? Was it a warning, a threat? The doctor never did a thing to hurt Jared, always looking out for him in the tough way that is the doctor's.

Suddenly, Misha is crowding him, putting a hand on Jared's shoulder.

“You okay?” he asks worried.

“Yeah, I...” Jared wipes the back of his hand over his mouth. “I'm fine. I just need a minute.”

“Go and wash yourself up,” Misha suggests with an encouraging pat on the back.
“Yes... thank you.” Jared is glad that his boss is sympathetic, not like the usual clientele he has to serve.

The hosts' washrooms are downstairs. Once again it is a good thing that there are secret stairwells where Jared can move without further contact with the patrons. Sure, it is still early, but there are always a few remaining from the night's activities.

Thankfully, the washroom is empty. Jared splashes some water in his face, then looks up right in the mirror.

Just when his mind starts to wander towards Jensen, Osric barges into the room.

“Hey brother,” he slurs, leaning heavily against the wall next to the door, “you good?”

“Hey Os,” Jared replies, supports himself against the sink. “Do you know why I'm here?”

“Eh... nope.” Osric waves his hand about. “I think you should ask a cleric; they know absolutely everything.”

“No, that's not... I mean I don't know why I'm here. I came to the institute when I was ten, but no one told me why. The then director said it's usually where orphans live, but that's a blatant lie.”

In the mirror, Jared sees his friend sliding down the wall, and when he turns around, Osric is lying on the tiles, a picture of misery.

“What happened?” Jared asks horrified, speeding to his side. “Did you work until now?”

Osric answers with waving hands and arms. “Yes! It was great! They booked the hot tub! It was great!”

Cupping his friend's face with both hands, Jared makes him hold still. The skin beneath his fingers is cold and clammy; Osric's eyes are bloodshot, the pupils blown.

“Os! How many patrons did you serve? What did they book?”

Wiggling his fingers, Osric counts. “... five. There were five of them. And... What's the second question?”

“You're drugged.”

“That's not the second question. Jared, I feel a bit queasy.”

Jared snorts. “I take your word for it. You need to go see the doc, Os.”

Jared puts one of Osric's arms around his neck and hauls the shorter man to his unsteady feet.

Nurse Huffman took pity on Jared who lurk about the infirmary the whole day, but after she told
him about the extent of Osric's injuries, he wished she didn't have.

It is only because of omegas' natural self-lubrication that Os survived the severe injuries due to rectal insertion of too big objects.

Jared is livid.

Storming into Curator Rhodes office, he demands prosecution of the alphas, which only gets him solitary confinement.

It is not so bad. Jared has a rest from disgusting patrons and he even gets some food this time. He has his spoon keeping him company, tapping it onto the walls and floor in the darkness and finding new rhythms.

The only thing he is missing is working in the kitchen – and occasionally getting a whiff of some cinnamon. He doesn't hunt the scent, but he very accidentally is always around the person using it.

Sitting alone in the dark, keeping himself sane with the help of a spoon, the reminiscence of a certain spice keeps him alive. It makes him daydream of green eyes and freckled skin; he even gets hard when he pretty much never does, when he gets rid of an occasional erection quickly and in secret. It is the nature of his work that made him doubt love in all its manifestations.

After three days he is brought into the washrooms to take a shower and then to Curator Rhodes office.

"We have a new patron, Jared," she says.

Jared focuses on her short dark hair: Rhodes doesn't like the hosts looking straight at her, she made that quite clear in her first week.

"He asked specifically for you and booked restraints and castigation."

Jared's heart skips a beat.

This is bad. A new patron is always a dark horse, all the more when they book castigation: you don't know when they think it is enough.

The curator pushes a little white thing over the desk towards Jared and says, “This is yours.”

*Oh crap*, it is a painkiller.

Jared's hands are shaking so much that he is almost not able to take it out of the blister. He swallows it dry and then thanks the curator as is right and proper.

“It's the lily room; Matt will bring you.”

So she thinks he may bolt. That is not as far-fetched as it may seem, it happens occasionally. If it wasn't for the other omega, Jared thinks he may actually chicken out.

Matt is a nice guy, but his survival instinct makes him do some serious shit sometimes. He'd never let someone slip through if it meant he was punished.

The lily room is decorated in some old English or French country style. Jared doesn't have any idea what it is called, but there are roses and lilies everywhere, even the retaining jigs at the walls correspond to the design.
Shedding his linen tunic and pants, Jared stands naked and waits for the patron.

Fear is making him shiver, but it doesn't account for the faintness crawling up his bones. He has troubles standing and keeping his eyes open.

Suddenly, a figure emerges from the haze surrounding him. He shrinks back from the hand reaching out for his face.

“You really are a treat, Jay,” a deep voice says.

Jay, who's Jay? He needs to tell the patron that he is in the wrong room. No wait, he is Jay.

Hands are stroking his chest and back, keeping him upright when he sways too much. They cup his flaccid dick, and Jay moans.

The patron ushers him to the bed and a familiar crinkle tells him that below the linen sheets, there is a plastic one to prevent messing up the mattress. That is good because he dissolves right into the linen.

He feels molten, liquid, as if his limbs were jello. When the patron guides his arms over his head and fetters them with shackles that are inset in the headboard, he wonders why his wrists are enclosed in the metal.

“... no painkiller,” he says with the gelatinous mass that is his tongue.

“Of course it isn't,” the patron says, “I want it to be delightful for me.”

A joyful smirk is audible in his voice that unsettles Jay. It is soon forgotten when his knees are pushed against his chest and a dry finger prods against his hole.

“Oh, nice and tight,” the finger's owner states, elated.

“You're wonnoff Os' padrons”, Jay slurs.

“Is that the little one? He was quite cute. But my friends raved about you half the night, I just had to come back and try you.”

Jay remembers what the nurses told about Os' injuries and stops being Jay.

He is Jared, and Jared is scared to death.

Jensen only has a few candies left; whether he likes it or not, he'll need to tell Jared to make new ones.

It was easy to avoid the omega for the last couple of days, though he thought more often about him than he liked.

At the moment, he is too busy to spend much time on thinking about anybody though. His secretary is sick and, according to the red-headed nurse, won't be able to work for another week. That's bad
since Osric is a great help. He may not be as educated as an alpha or even a beta secretary, but he is intelligent and quick witted, and knows the Institute from inside.

He told Jensen about the thirty years old heating system that doesn't work in the basements where the servers' dormitories and utility rooms are placed.

Yesterday, Jensen walked through the tunnel-like hallways to have a closer look at the system. As it seems, a replacement is badly needed; there were some very disturbing noises echoing through the corridors. They almost sounded like someone hitting the walls and steam pipes.

It will need to wait until his secretary's back though; Jensen just doesn't have the time to hunt for a contractor to replace the heating. And he thinks that an omega living there is more interested in a working heating than an alpha warden who goes home after his shift ends.

There is another urgent matter he needs to check.

“Hey Ruthie, it's me,” he says smiling into the phone.

“Jensen!” she squeals happily. The amount of enthusiasm Ruth Connell is able to muster is simply amazing. “How are you, you stupid bastard? You're a senator yet?”

“Not yet. I'm director of the Jubilation Institute; it's only an interim position though.”

“The Jubilee? That's a renowned one, congrats!”

“Yeah, thanks.” Jensen is wandering around his office, rubbing his neck. “Ruthie, I need your help. The Institute's in a sorry state; I think the last director's been more than negligent of his duties. I think they doctored with the medical records.”

He draws a deep breath. “Ruthie, I need an independent investigator.”

“You want me to check the records?”

“Yes.”

“Hm,” she says, “you know it's only an interim post?”

“I do know. But I can't leave in a few weeks or months and leave this mess behind I just found. This may be a public omega institute, but they're humans. They don't deserve to be treated like animals, even if they're criminals.”

“Aw honey, you've always been a friend of humankind, even if some of your views are conservative and antiquated.”

“Ruthie, please.”

“Well, since I'm overqualified for this menial job, I want accommodations. And desserts.” There is a laugh in her voice. “You're lucky I need a break from my studies.”

Ruth's promise takes a load off Jensen's mind. Heaving a sigh of relief, he says, “Thank you so much! I'll email you the details.”

“Oh Jensen? I think it's best we don't tell Jubilee's good doctor that I'm a professor. I'm pretty sure he won't like it.”

He reassures her that he'll tell no one about her and makes small talk for a few minutes more.
It certainly is a good call to keep Sheppard in ignorance of Ruth's professorate at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Most doctors disqualify her from an executive position in medical science just because she's a beta.

It will take more time – decades probably – until the alphakind will accept betas as equals. And seeing the first successes the advocates for beta rights achieved, the omega rights activists jump merrily on the bandwagon.

Still, there are natural differences between betas and omegas that argue against gender equality.

Jensen works on the email he wants to send to Ruth. He includes some of the information he found, some details blackened out.

Curator Rhodes brings a cup of coffee and the mail. She is pissed that she has to do the dirty work an omega took over from her. Before, she was pissed when Jensen reduced her workload and now she is insulted she has to do it again, even only for a few days.

Thank Alpha she stopped courting Jensen. He felt pretty embarrassed by her fawning, the more so because he didn't feel attracted by her in any way. Now she gets her job done efficiently but sulking, and Jensen is pretty okay with that.

When the email is sent, he thinks about taking a break. He is feeling weird, kind of dizzy, like he caught a head cold. His back hurts and his ass feels kind of numb from sitting too long. Hopefully he won't get sick; that would be absolutely inconvenient.

Then he thinks about seeking Jared for more sweets, but the phone rings.

"Hey Jensen, how's it going?" a deep male voice says.

"Senator Morgan," Jensen replies surprised and involuntarily sits straighter.

"I just wanted to check in with you. You already bored out of your mind?"

"No, sir. Unfortunately, there's more to do than I thought. Director Pileggi left quite a mess after his death."

"A mess? What do you mean?"

"Um," Jensen isn't sure how much to tell his boss; he is still researching into the problems and doesn't want to speak ill of the dead. "Apparently, a few years ago there was a renovation scheduled that was performed only partially, leaving the living quarters in poor condition. They hired contractors nepotistically and I think some of the wardens are also ill-prepared for their challenging task."

He takes a deep breath; here it comes. Pay attention to the wording.

"As it seems, they made up some of the medical records. I don't know yet if the doctor is just bad at keeping records or if it happened on someone's command. In any case, it's reflecting badly on the management."

There is a short beat. Then Morgan says, "Are you sure about the records? Do you have any proof?"

Jensen clears his throat. "I entertain some more than vague suspicion, but I don't have hard evidence yet."
“Alright. I'll send someone to look into it, Jensen.”

“Uh, thank you, sir, but no thanks. This is something I need to take care of myself. I'll keep you informed though, of course.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, sir. It's a matter of honor; I just can't bear the thought of leaving this mess as my legacy, even if my position here is only temporarily.”

After another short beat, Morgan relents. “Very well. If you wish to do it your way... go ahead, but keep me informed.”

“Of course, sir. Thank you, sir, I won't fail you.”

“I know. Have a nice day, Jensen.”

That was weird. Jensen never would have thought that the senator would take a liking to him, but apparently, he did. It could be the open door to his career in Washington A.C.

He should go see Collins, the cook, who issued a formal complaint about one of his assistants being in solitary confinement. It was only by accident that he found the paper buried under a pile of other papers. The date stamp is already two days old which indicates how overworked Rhodes must be.

Also, it would offer an occasion to talk to Jared about more sweets, maybe see long fingers work. See a little smile curve pink lips and light up hazel-ish eyes. The thought makes a strange feeling – *anticipation*? – loom in his guts.

So he walks down the back stairs to the first basement and catches himself humming. There is no time though to marvel at this realization, because a body crashes into him, almost falling down the stairs. At the last moment, he can prevent both of them tumbling.

“Jared?” he asks incredulously, lowering the young omega onto the step.
Jared looks up and blinks unfocused eyes.

“Director, um, Jensen,” he slurs, “’m sorry, ’m a bit wobbly on my legs... I think.”

He looks crinkled, roughed up; maybe even...

“Jared, are you drugged?”

Jared shakes his head fiercely. “Naaw, it's never drugs, it's always painkillers.” With a big wave of his arm, he continues, “I just wanna see the stars. Maybe there's life on Mars, you know, a better life.”

“But you're on the way downstairs.”

“Oh. I just wanna lay down a bit. He finished early, so I've a bit time until...”

Jared closes his eyes and goes slack. Jensen needs to shake him to make him stay awake.

“Come on,” he says, “you need to go see the doctor.”

Jared sniffs. “He doesn't like me, the doctor. He used to play with me when I was little, but now I'm too old and too tall and too ugly, and he stopped liking me.”
“What do you mean, when you were little? How long have you been here?”

“Um, since I was ten. When my... my parents died and I was all alone and no one wanted me. They said this was the only place for me, but no one likes me. Well, maybe except for Osric and Miss Samantha, but she's long gone and Miss Rhodes is curator now and she doesn't like me and gives me painkillers that are not...”

Jensen's head is reeling.

No omega can be sentenced to public service before the age of consent which is fifteen. And there are omega orphanages, there is no need to foster an omega boy in a public institute. What is going on?

And what did he say about Curator Rhodes?

“Wait a sec. You mean the curator gives you drugs? Roofies even?”

“Well, yeah... I mean since they're not painkillers.”

Giving him a leg-up, Jensen notes that Jared may be thin and lanky, yet he is quite heavy. *Muscles, there are firm muscles under hot skin.*

Jared is unrecognizable, being chatty and lively. Jensen wishes it wasn't because of the drugs; he'd like to know a spirited Jared, see a spark in these beautiful hazel-ish eyes.

“How often does she do this?” he asks and ignores the warmth and movement under his hands on Jared's back. The blood on his tunic and pants he can't ignore though.

“It was my second time... or third? Some patrons are pretty screwed up. The last one was really kinky, I can tell you. But he didn't last.” Jared snickers. “Stupid dick finished early, and Matt wasn't there to pick me up so I decided to go to the infirmary. The doc doesn't like me though.”

“So are you in pain?”

“What? Noooo, I'm feeling great!” He emphasizes his statement with sweeping gestures, stumbling down the corridor, and Jensen notices that Jared's limping is worse than the last time he saw him.

“What's with your leg?” he inquires. “Did you hurt it?”

Confused, Jared looks at his foot, then he beams at Jensen. “Not my leg – it's my hip. I got it dislocated at work, and it's still healing.”

How for all the world do you dislocate a *hip* at work? Oh, let's face it, Jared's work consists of being fucked, but still – how do you dislocate a hip?
Chapter 3

This afternoon, Jensen has to reschedule his appointments because he is stuck in the infirmary.

Doctor Sheppard is appalled by Jared's condition and immediately begins his treatment, while Jensen takes the opportunity to visit his secretary, but the young omega is sound asleep.

Nurse Huffman seems to be sympathetic to Osric, she readily tells about his injuries which make Jensen gasp in horror. Never could he imagine that a proud alpha could hurt another person in this way; it is even worse that it concerns a public server who is a ward of the state. They are protected by rules and laws as long as they work off their sentence, but the state has failed both of these poor guys.

Jensen peruses the medical records and grills the beta about the accuracy of the statement. He tries to find out how long exactly Jared has been in the Institute, but Huffman has only worked there since last year so she doesn't know. The other nurse, a young beta named Amy, is off-duty.

He won't interrogate Sheppard before Ruth has a look into the records, that is for sure; he won't give him occasion to deny anything and then destroy evidence.
He is more successful in regards to the 'work-related accidents' the servers seem to be prone to. It is mostly the omegas that are hurt, betas not so much. A good deal are bruises and abrasions caused by restraints and shackles or cuffs; however, their use is sanctioned and they're only minor injuries, so there is no need to follow up on these cases.

Then there are the broken wrists and fingers, the blackouts due to choking, the beatings and floggings.

It is quite unsettling, he thinks, that these injuries are considered so standard that no one felt the need to inform the Institute's director about the reasons for his secretary's absence.

Or did they?

If there is a drug administering curator – who doesn't call the patrons out on their transgressions – and embezzling wardens in this institute, what about the previous director? Could he have been so shortsighted that he never caught on to certain incidents?

And what about Jensen? It is just an interim position; he'll be off in a few weeks, so would it be a wise decision to foul his own nest and then hope that none of the clerics in Washington A.C. would expect him to do the same thing again? It could mean the end of his career before it even started.

Looking down at a sleeping Jared, Jensen feels tired. Sheppard had to sedate the young omega to treat his wounds. There was some rectal tearing and only minor bruises on his torso, but his back was densely covered with welts and lacerations that wouldn't scar, according to the physician.

This is so wrong.

Omegas are the weakest, frailest members of society, weaker even than betas. They should be protected by the alphahood, not hurt.

Jared looks so young, pale and brittle like dried leaves. Jensen wants to run his fingers over his hot cheeks and through his silky locks; he is horrified when he becomes aware of the fact that he is actually running his fingers through Jared's hair.

He is petting Jared.

Maybe he should admit to himself that he is attracted to the omega.

Once, Jared's mother told him a story about the Bogeyman.

He was tucked in securely in his cozy bed and his mom told a story about a big black alpha stealing naughty children.

A few weeks later, both of his parents were dead and he landed in the Jubilation Institute. There he found that the Bogeyman was a real person, alive and terrifying.

If he could remember that time during waking hours, he would know that the Bogeyman was only a
tall black-skinned alpha, but back then, in his infantile mind, he was – well, the Bogeyman, who stole a naughty boy Jared from his home and family.

He only remembers in his dreams though, where the memories are sharp and piercing, where Miss Samantha has continuous arguments about a little boy's fate with the cause of nightmares.

You got too attached to the little brat, he said.

Well, I'm sorry, but I'm a mother, she said, what did you expect when you dumped the kid here?

It doesn't matter, he said, we expect you now to hand in your notice.

What? she said, you can't do that!

Yes, we can, he said, or do you prefer a fate as public servers for your kids?

And Jared remembers how pale Miss Samantha turned, a sharp contrast to the Bogeyman's black skin.

Jared is there when Osric stirs, waking up slowly.

“Hey,” he croaks with a parched throat. He squirms on the stool he is sitting on because his ass is achingly sore, but he is glad enough that the pain is not worse. His back is another matter altogether though.

“Hey,” Osric replies. Pointing to Jared's bandages, he continues, “Did you get some holidays, too?”

Jared huffs a bitter laugh. “Yeah, one of your last patrons.”

“Frank?”

“Yeah, Frank.”

“Asshole.”

“That he is.”

Jared sighs a deep breath, then asks tilting his head, “Who's this?”

Osric looks to the sleeping form in the bed nearest to the door. After a short, sad pause, he says, “Colin. He chose the pills.”

“Oh,” says Jared, “I didn't know.”

Colin is the new arrival. He was only starting to work as a host, but apparently, he couldn't stomach his 'duties'. Like so many other hosts that choose the pills or the knife each year, each month, he stole as many pills he could get a hold of and then took an overdose.
Jared swore to himself he'd never be one of them, even if he ended up in a non-governmental. Sometimes he thinks it was because of his stubbornness, but he knows deep down that he took that oath because he still believes in soul mates – that one day he'll find his soul's other half among the countless alphas he has to serve.

Inevitably, his mind wanders to the person that he is thinking about most of the time – the director.

It can't be. Jensen can't be Jared's soul mate; he didn't feel either the stroke of lightning or the prickling all the stories tell about. It must be attraction – nothing more, nothing less – to a gorgeous human.

Jared knows love; his parents' love, Miss Samantha's love, the crush he had on the cute delivery omega a couple of years back – of course does it count.

And he knows sex; he knows how to keep still, when to cry or scream and when to not fight.

But he doesn't know how to make love.

When he thinks about Jensen, he thinks about warmth and freckles, holding a body tight in his arms, comfort and happiness. He thinks about home, the place where your soul rests.

He gets up and moves in front of the window because he can't sit anymore and it is not the first time he is happy that the infirmary is not situated in the basement like the dormitories.

The sky is cloudy, promising rain.

Osric is sad when Jared replies to his question and tells about his injuries.

“Oh brother, this sucks mightily.” He sighs.

“Yeah,” Jared says and stares down at his hands resting on the window sill. “Sometimes I wish I could open the fucking door and... just walk away.”

For a long moment, Osric scrutinizes him. “That's why you always gaze at the stars, don't you?”

“Yeah,” he admits reluctantly, “Up on the roof, that's the only place to get some peace and quiet and I think about stepping on the clouds like a ladder and... vanishing from this life.”

“Brother,” his friend says warningly and concerned, “you can't think that.”

“No, Os, I'm not... I won't do that, I promise.”

“Good. That's good.” Osric smiles. “It won't be long until you served your sentence, then you're free like a bird.”

“I don't think so, Os.” Jared's eyes are getting wet with tears; he has to fight not to shed them. “You've been sentenced because you stole from a john, but I... I never had a trial. I'm here because I'm an orphan.”

“Anyway. Your days in this beautiful establishment are numbered, believe me.”

Jared looks at him incredulously.

“If you don't believe me, go see the director, talk to him. He thinks very little of omegas, but he's a fair man.”
“You think?”

“I know.”

Jared turns back to the window, can't believe what he sees.

“Do you see that?” he asks and how stupid is he, of course Os, who is sitting in bed, can't see out of the window.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Jared whispers.

The Bogeyman is already gone.

Amy Gumenick, the cute blonde nurse, is quite speechless when Jensen pushes her out of the infirmary's archive.

“I hope you have everything you need,” he says closing the door.

Ruth tilts her head and eyes the room. “I think as long as there's coffee and cookies, I'm okay.”

“Alright.” Jensen puts the files down on the dusty desk in the corner. “This is Jared's file. I think it's the key to this mess. He said he's here since nine years, the records start a few days after his fifteenth birthday with his entry checkup though. Then there's the curator's file which states a completely different entry date.”

While Ruth is opening the files and already skimming through them, Jensen continues.

“We have a time gap of five years, different dates and a crooked curator. Now tell me there's nothing fishy going on here.”

Ruth lifts her head from the files. “What do you mean, crooked curator?”

Jensen throws himself in a chair and rakes his fingers through his hair. “Rhodes has been administering drugs. I called her out on it and she admitted to giving sedatives and roofies to the servers. She said she did it to please some patrons and there was no money involved, but I don't believe her. Drugging the servers is not sanctioned, she'd never risk her job just for a thank you. She must make some money out of it.”

“Did you fire her?”

“Of course I did! Now I have to hunt for a new curator to top it all.”

Ruth's brown eyes are earnest when she looks at Jensen. “You really take this job very seriously.”

Jensen throws a hand in the air. “I'm just pissed that they exploit delinquent minor omegas, the weakest members of our society.” Mostly he is pissed that these illegal activities led to Jared being
hurt. “There are laws to protect them here; the Institute should be a protected area until their sentences are served, but instead, these kids are preyed upon – by the very men they’re supposed to keep healthy.”

“Eh, you know what I think about that theory,” Ruth comments snidely.

“Do you think it’s better to have sex-driven alphas raping betas and children?” Jensen asks unbelievingly.

“Of course not! I just think that alphas are far less sex-driven than some people think. There are societies overseas that’re thriving even without the concept of public serving.”

“I know!” Jensen retorts. “But we’re not living overseas.”

Ruth stands, walks around the desk to kneel beside Jensen’s chair. It is the common position for betas and omegas to appease alphas, to acknowledge and respect their social status.

Taking his hands into hers, she says, “Jensen, I know you’ve already come a long way, but you’ve always been one of the top dogs just because you’re alpha. You never had to experience the unfairness of customs and traditions and laws; never had to leave your home to study. A few years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to work as a doctor, they’d only have accepted me being a nurse, so I’m thankful about that. Nevertheless, I was in Europe for eight years only to become an approbated doctor; there were so many omegas and betas leaving the country to learn and work in Europe until they closed the borders for unattended non-alphas.”

“I’ve been there too!” Jensen snarls. He feels cornered by the uncomfortable facts Ruth provides. He always felt his country, a theocracy by the grace of Alpha, was the most magnificent, the greatest country. Then he learned about other forms of government when he was abroad and was confused at how they could work efficiently.

Jensen thinks about nimble fingers, how Jared knows exactly what to do. He thinks about Ruth's exceeding expert knowledge, how she had to learn abroad what alphas are able to learn at almost any small town college. He thinks about Osric’s enthusiasm for his work, how he never gets tired until a problem is solved.

Clinging to his ancestors’ teachings, he continues, “I’ve seen the omegas running themselves ragged to live up to their society’s expectations. They’re just not built for challenging tasks, frail as they are!”

“Oh Jensen, honey,” Ruth says smiling, cupping his cheek with one hand. “If you’d only open your eyes to see for yourself and not use other people's glasses.”
When he leaves Ruth to go back to his office, Jensen gives a wide berth to the room where Jared is. He is so tired. Discussions with his friend always leave him exhausted since Ruth's sharp intellect always challenges his thinking and opinions, but this time he feels bodily exhausted.

It is true that most European societies and states are far less constricting in regards to an omega's role in life. It doesn't mean though that it is correct.

When he closes his office door, a familiar voice greets him.

“It's not nice to keep your senator waiting, Mister Ackles.”

Completely caught unawares, Jensen freezes. “Senator Morgan? What are you doing here?”

The senator is sitting in one of the leather chairs that he moved from the window to the desk. He is smiling, his eyes sparkling but humorless.

“I happened to be nearby and thought I would apprise myself of your progress.”

_Why is he here?_ Jensen is not nearly important enough for Morgan to change plans. What did he say on the phone that made him come and check on Jensen?
Wait, the senator had been the Institute's director before Pileggi. What if Pileggi only kept up what Morgan started?

That is impossible, Morgan is an honorable cleric, dealing directly with Reverend Senior Senator Beaver and His Holiness, Presiding Pope Timothy.

And yet...

Maybe he should be wary.

“I feel honored, Senator,” he says. “May I offer you a drink? Coffee?”

“Yes, black. Thanks.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he registers movements that make him flinch. It is the damn alpha, Robert Wisdom, standing in the corner and merging with the walls. Jensen is pretty scared of the man, not only because he is one of the few black-skinned Africans in the United American States, but also because he exudes danger like an aura. He is the senator's right-hand man and, despite his air of superiority, maybe an omega, as Jensen suspects.

Wisdom's presence in his office unnerves Jensen good and proper; he still pours a cup of coffee, handing it to Morgan with a steady hand. It is an expensive brand since Jensen likes good coffee; it is not easy to get, though, because the African producers keep the supply short.

After a taste of the hot liquid and an appreciating hum, Morgan addresses Jensen who is sitting tensely behind his desk.

“Well, this is quite a good brew,” he says with a small smile. “Looks like a director's life becomes you, Jensen. Have you been very busy?”

“Um, well…” Jensen clears his throat to buy some time. “The whole estate is in a terrible mess. I already told you that the renovation they scheduled a few years ago was only finished in the upper levels. Accordingly, the servers' living quarters and basement levels are in a bad condition, especially the heating, and the sanitary installations are in desperate need of renovation.”

Taking a deep breath, Jensen continues. “Then there's... this is not easy, Senator.” On an encouraging nod, he says, “I had to fire Curator Rhodes. She violated institute law by administering non-sanctioned drugs to the public servers. I can't prove it yet, but I'm sure she got bribed to do it. And there's at least one warden embezzling anything that's not nailed down.”

“I see. That surely is quite some mess you've got to take care of.” Morgan says, putting his cup on the desk. He crosses his legs and steeples his fingers. “What about these patient records that've been tampered with? Do you already know more?”

Carefully, Jensen. “No, I'm sorry, I didn't have time to look closer into this matter. As it seems, there has been a high turnover of nurses in the infirmary which led to bad file management. In this case, we have to hold bad leadership against Doctor Sheppard.”

“Ah yes,” Morgan agrees, motioning to Wisdom who disappears through the office door. “Good old Sheppard always was more interested in the hands-on aspect of his job than the bureaucracy. I think I will have a word with him.”

“I'm sure that would be helpful, sir”
You're lower than a cockroach, they say.

*You're alone, no one will help you,* they say.

*That's all you're good for, being fucked; a hole to be filled,* they say.

He still hears the words in his dreams. *It's not true,* he wants to scream, but the words are burning deep inside him, etching away parts of his soul.

He still remembers the pain and hurt from the first couple of years, when all he felt was homesickness and loneliness, when he only worked in the garden and kitchen and heard the noises from the bedrooms through the walls.

Then the hurt and pain got more bodily when he was thought to be old enough to work as a host and experienced the things that caused the noises inside the bedroom walls. He was disgusted, still is occasionally.

Now that the Bogeyman – a living nightmare, burning the earth where its shadow touches it – is walking the grounds, he can't be sure if he is asleep or not, if he is awake or not. Dream and reality are bleeding together in dark colors full of fear.

Suddenly, the air around him is gone; he can't breathe through his nose, so he opens his eyes and mouth in a desperate attempt to draw in oxygen.

He is awake now; he knows he is awake, but there is the Bogeyman standing beside his bed and there is still no air, just a bitter liquid rolling over his tongue, burning his gullet. He can't help swallowing, then coughing.

Next to Jared's bed in the infirmary, there is a giant alpha, his skin dark like the moonless sky. There are stars though, two white stars in his face, and a row of pearls laid bare under a frightening grin.

Jared starts feeling weird, the bad kind of weird.

The giant folds up, shrinking down to human size until he kneels beside the bed, and his lips are almost touching Jared's ear.

The omega turns away as far as possible and the alpha is following suit, leaning over the other man's body.

Jared's hands are tensing into hard fists, balling into the sheets. He feels too hot and too cold, starts sweating and shivering.

His skin is crawling away from his flesh, leaving his bones to bleach under the stars.

The Bogeyman's breath is ghosting over his cheek, causing red scars where no one can see.

*There's a bad man in this building,* the voice says.

*It's a really, really bad man,* it says, *and he wants to kill you.*
Chapter 4

Again, Jensen feels weird – the bad kind of weird.

Ruth is holding a thermometer in her small hands, looks at it. “You only have a temperature,” she says.

“But I feel like I’m burning up,” Jensen says shivering with cold.

Putting the device away, Ruth takes his face in her hands, cups his cheeks. She tilts it here and there, scrutinizes his eyes.

A small, wistful smile steals onto her lips. “The hints are unmistakable, honey. You've found your soul mate.”

Jensen is sitting in the chair in the infirmary's archive with his mouth agape. The omega.

“But... That's impossible,” he stammers. “I'd know if I... I mean there are signs...”
“Oh poor honey, did you read those bad Harlequin novels too?” Ruth's smile is morphing into a smug grin, which makes her look like a red-headed imp. “There's no lightning involved when you meet your soul mate, rest assured.”

“I know that, Ruthie, I'm not stupid!”

His friend's impish look makes him reconsider.

“I mean, I should have sensed him, felt him in my bones.”

Ruth tilts her head. “You said you didn't feel good lately.”

Everything slots together, all the pieces into their places. “Oh Alpha, it's because Jared was hurt.”

Quite surprised, Ruth sits back on the edge of the desk. “You mean poor Jared that I had to look into, don't you?”

Jensen nods, then asks somewhat perplexed, “What do you mean, 'poor Jared'?”

“Jensen, honey, the boy has been here for nine years. His own records start just after his fifteenth birthday, but there are indications in other servers' records that clearly say he came here shortly after his tenth birthday.”

“Jared already said it, but I thought he was messing up dates because he was roofied. It's plain impossible,” Jensen says shaking his head.

“I can show you. It's obvious that someone didn't want anybody to know about it, but all the same it's obvious that someone hid information between the entries. You'd never known if you'd never looked into it.”

Standing up, Jensen starts pacing the room; there is too much energy in his body to keep still.

Drawing a hand over his face and neck, he says, “Holy crap, Morgan must know about this. He was director at the very time, he just has to know about it.”

He turns to his friend. “That's why he's here. I mentioned the medical records on the phone a couple of days ago, and here he is!”

Suddenly, his legs are too weak to carry him, so he collapses into the chair. “This is big, Ruthie. This is too big. I'm at a loss what to do. What am I to do?”

Ruth pulls the other chair over in order to sit opposite to Jensen.

“Alright,” she says. “So Senator Morgan is the one who maybe brought Jared here when he was still a little boy. In any case, he knew about him since he was the Institute's director at the time and maintained silence about the matter. We'll keep it a secret for the time being. Morgan is too dangerous a man to make him an enemy.”

“You think he'll... take drastic action?”

“Morgan? No. But this acolyte of his... I think his soul is as black as his face.”

Jensen never thought of Morgan as dangerous.

He always paid attention to not offend the senator since he didn't want to put his career on the line, and Wisdom never behaved as crazy as this Tigerman guy, who writes letters to the senator every week, so how was Jensen supposed to know that he was walking on thin ice when working with
both of them?

If you don't want to commit political or social suicide, Washington A.C. is anything but a dangerous city.

“Alright,” he agrees finally, “we're going to keep a low profile. And then?”

“I'll call Rob. You know, the HR manager at the hospital. His father-in-law is a judge; I'll just ask him a hypothetical question and then we'll see what he says. What do you think?”

“Won't he become suspicious?”

“Naaaw! I always ask him hypothetical questions about the books I read. You know, like, what if these situations were real, would the guys end up in jail?”

Jensen is doubtful about the strategy; at least though, it will buy him a couple of days. Reluctantly, he nods.

“Great!” Ruth decides cheerfully, patting on Jensen's knee. “Now that it's settled, let's have something to eat. I'm starving.”

“Yeah, I think you earned some coffee. Maybe a muffin?”

“You have muffins?”

“I'm pretty sure there are some left.”

Locking the archive's door, they head to the dining hall.

Jensen still can't wrap his head around the fact that Morgan – well-respected Senator Morgan – has a skeleton in his closet. And who knows what else.

Half his mind is occupied with the fact that his mentor and sponsor is involved in devious schemes – the other half though has to deal with the fact that there is a soul mate for Jensen, and it is a convicted public server named Jared, who may be not as criminal as it seems.

And just then, he sees Jared standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at them. As soon as he notices Jensen and Ruth, he starts moving upstairs.

Something about his posture is off, Jensen thinks, but he can't put a finger on it, and while a delighted smile is blossoming on his lips, Ruth shrieks.

The stars, existing by night and non-existing by day, in the same rhythm like breathing in and out, only so much slower, and maybe it is the universe breathing – the stars are the only constant things in his life. He can see them hiding inside the sun's light that is the brightest one of them all, but oh! so jealous of other luminaries.
He knows what to do and even if he'll regret it later, it needs to be done – he needs to do it. There is no way around, just straight ahead into the light of the fires.

“Jared,” the fires say.

If his important duty – his single purpose – wouldn't preoccupy his mind, he would ponder over this word's meaning. But since his single-mindedness doesn't allow other thoughts than Find and Kill, he doesn't even register that he is spoken to.

The fires are different in size and shape, but burning still the same. He too is burning, he can see it whenever he looks at his hand, glowing vivid and bright. The object he is holding is cool; he forgot its name, but it is cool and sharp, and he has to hide it from the fires.

There are so many of them, he can't find the one he is searching for.

“What the bloody hell are you doing?” one of them says. He ignores it because he found the other one, the dark light that oozes eclipse into the sky.

He is drawing nearer, fearlessly facing the darkness and the scent of cinnamon.

The fire next to it is making a high pitched noise, but it is the smell that is confounding him. Why should he kill something smelling of home?

Then there is a scuffle, another fire, the knife cutting through flesh and Jared blinks his eyes open, looking down at red on his hands.

“He won't make it.”

Ruth is upset; yet she needs to check on Jensen's wound. It is only a shallow cut on his arm that nurse Huffman already cleaned and wrapped up, but his friend has to see for herself. She is prodding and poking and re-wrapping Jensen's arm, all the time talking about poor Doctor Sheppard, who hasn't been as lucky as Jensen, and Jared, who has caused all this excitement.

“Do you think I can see him now?”

“Yes, but Senator Morgan wants to see him too.”

“He can't,” Jensen replies, “it's my last chance to get the truth out of him. You have to stall the senator.”

“Oh course, honey.”

Standing up, Jensen wants to leave the room, but Ruth stops him by taking his hand.

“He tried to kill you,” she says, her eyes big and dark with sadness, “you know that, don't you?”

“No, he didn't. I know for sure he didn't want to kill me. Yes, he tried, but he didn't want to.”
She keeps on looking at him, not impish, but sad this time.

“Ruth,” he sighs. “Jared was kind of drugged, you saw it for yourself. If he’d been in control of himself, he’d never done it. He's my soul mate.”

“Being a soul mate doesn’t mean that he likes or even loves you, honey. You know that it takes time for the bond to settle. In the meantime, everything is possible.”

“I know,” Jensen replies unhappily, “but he didn't want to.”

The man in the hospital bed looks pale and small. He is surrounded by beeping machines that make him look even smaller.

Jensen takes a seat in the chair next to the bed. He is overwhelmed by the occurrences of the last hours, but there is no time to rest now.

“Doctor Sheppard,” he says in a low voice.

The man in the bed turns his head. Looking at him, his lips distort into a pained smile.

“Director Ackles,” the doctor says.

“Please call me Jensen. You saved my life, Mark, there's no need to cling to phrases of civility.”

Sheppard sighs, a low, strained noise. “Yes... I saved your life... the only decent thing I did in years and look what it got me.”

He lifts his hand; Jensen grabs it, paying attention to the IV lines.

“Jensen, I don't have much time left so you need to listen closely.” Another strained sigh. “There's a safe in my office hidden under the filing cabinet. The number is my wife's birthday backwards. Everything's in there, all the files and data that prove what Morgan did, still does. You need to get it before he does. Promise you'll do the right thing and bring the fucker down.”

Jensen is stunned. “I...”

“You'll see. When you see what he did, you'll know what to do. You're a better man than I am.”

Closing his eyes, Sheppard keeps on talking.

“I never wanted to be the bad one in the story. I tried to do a good job, help the hosts in the Institute, and I think, at the beginning, I was a decent doctor. Then, nine years and four months ago, Morgan brought a tiny, scrawny boy to me, said he was an orphan and bribed me into taking him in and forging his records. When I found the reason for his actions, I wanted to get out, but he threatened my family. I was too entangled in his machinations and scared what may happen. So I kept my mouth shut.”

“But you made those entries in other servers' records, didn't you?”
“Yes. It was the only way to get someone onto his tracks without putting my family at risk.” Now looking straight into Jensen's eyes, Sheppard continues urgently, “You need to get Jared off those 'vitamins' and 'contraceptives'; it's not too late yet, but if he keeps on taking them, they'll kill him.

“Jensen, he's not an omega, he's an alpha, and the drugs are suppressing his bodily development; they prevent him from becoming the man he's supposed to be.”

Jensen is stunned. “Wh-what? I don't under-?”

“He's an alpha, I swear he is. Look him up; if you Google him, you'll find him.”

“I already did, I can't find a Jared Paladecki on the interweb.”

“Padalecki,” Sheppard breathes. “His name is Padalecki.”

He closes his eyes and falls asleep, his breathing evening out.

Jensen is sitting next to him and says “Thank you,” when it is too late for the doctor to hear.

A knock at the door startles him. Nurse Huffman sticks her head in the door, announces that Sheppard's family have arrived.

Jensen has to talk with them, a beautiful blonde beta and two teenage boys, apparently both alphas. He offers assistance and his condolences, resorts to phrases since he feels the whole time like he is underwater. The world feels odd, but he has to function anyway for appearances' sake.

After escaping the tears, desperation and sadness, he needs to see Jared. He is longing for his smile, the scent of his hair and the feel of his skin. He wants to be close to the other man, as close and as long as possible.

It is weird that he can't determine whether his feelings changed since he learned the truth about the boy he thought to be an omega. They definitely didn't change because of the attempt on his life since Jared clearly was under the influence of some kind of drugs.

The question is, who is the mastermind behind it? Is it truly Senator Morgan? Did he try to conceal his trail? Or was it a completely different person with unknown reasons?

Jensen rubs his hands over his face; he can feel a headache coming.

At this very moment, he happens to glance out of the window looking over the backyard and there, in the corner, is Jared kneeling on the floor.
Jared doesn't want to wake up.

He can't remember what happened before the world tilted and went blank, but there was blood involved for sure.

“What did you do, you stupid fucker?” a voice says laced with tears.

Jared pries his eyes open. The world stays black though.

He is in the familiar solitary cell with nothing in it save for the sound of his ragged breathing and some scratching on the far side of the door. Maybe he'll find the spoon soon.

“Os, is that you?” Jared asks.

“Of course it's me, idiot.” Osric sounds exasperated. “The institute is thrumming with rumors. So, what did you do?”

Yeah, what did he do? He remembers lights and blood, but surely there is more to it

Jensen.

Jensen- the director was there. The doctor too, but he can't remember more.
“I don’t.”

“I need to go,” Osric interrupts.

He can hear feet shuffling and after a short silence, there are noises of people on the other side of the door. Keys clink, metal croaks; the door opens.

Jared can’t see the man standing in the sliver of light clearly, his eyes blinking in the brightness, but he knows the voice even after years.

“Jared, Jared,” the man says, “I’d never thought you to be so aggressive. It saddens me to meet you again under such devastating circumstances.”

Jared shrinks back. His eyes are blown wide with fear; his heart yearns for the man's touch – a hug, a pat on the shoulder – and at the same time, he never wants to feel the touch of those hands on his skin again.

Never ever again.

“I think you know,” Morgan continues, “that hurting a member of the management is punished severely, all the more, considering you tried to assassinate the director.”

The director? Jensen? Jared would never hurt him; it would mean to lose home. And what does the former director mean, assassinate?

“And even worse, you succeeded in killing poor Doctor Sheppard.”

What? No! That is impossible, Jared would recall things like that...

Wouldn't he?

“No,” he says shaking his head. “No, I'd never... I couldn't...”

“It's okay,” Morgan soothes. “Since you didn't finish the one task you were supposed to do, it's my turn now to make sure you and Ackles won't have a chance to chat together.”

Morgan's figure seems to grow; it is a weird thing that happens whenever he uses his power as Alpha's Proxy, when he acts as a cleric, not a statesman. As a little boy, it freaked Jared out that his surrogate father was able to grow in size and impact, and then later that he used this ability to coerce Jared into things – mostly sex related – he didn't want to do when Morgan's powers of persuasion didn't work.

“I'm sorry I have to do this.” Morgan's voice sounds anything but sorry. “I really am. I always wanted to keep you safe, that's why you're here. To keep you safe.”

Why does he point out Jared's safety? Jared never felt safe in the Institute; he was bullied and hurt and abused, and life was literally hell.

Then he remembers Sheppard's words. Though he usually was grumpy, he never was cruel to Jared; he taught him how to play chess and brought toys and treated his wounds. Was he keeping Jared safe? He certainly didn't rape him at the age of fourteen.

A second silhouette in the door yanks Jared back to reality. It is the Bogeyman, dark and looming, entering the cell, and Jared scrambles away even though there is nothing in the room to hide but darkness.
Morgan's voice is booming out all through the hallway and cell. “Take a good look. This is how the Alpha Above punishes sinners against his word!”

Jared doesn't know who he is talking to, he is too busy thrashing around and avoiding the Bogeyman's black hands – in vain though. A vise-like grip envelopes both his wrists, yanking him upward and out of the cell.

His friends are standing there – Osric, Matt, Katie; at least a dozen hosts and wardens. Jared can see shock and fear and the need to help him in some of their eyes; there is nothing they can do though. He is being hauled and pulled through the corridor and then upstairs, in the direction of the backyard, while Morgan's voice is echoing sententiously, reciting prayers and Book passages.

The sinner – that is him, even if he doesn't know what he is supposed to have done. He doesn't know what to expect until his overwhelmed brain picks up on the one word that is being repeated: *castigation.*

Jared's blood is running cold through his veins. The castigation Morgan is talking about has nothing to do with the castigation Jared knows from work. There won't be customized floggers and crops that only hurt like Hell, but don't break the skin – when used correctly. This castigation is a whipping – nothing more, nothing less – with a genuine whip. And they won’t stop whipping until Jared is dead.
Chapter 5

Jensen is stumbling down the stairs. He feels like his brain is fried, feels so very scared, though he doesn't know why. Sure, he has seen Jared being bend over, his hands fettered to a metal ring in the paved part of the backyard, but he can't imagine that they will see it through now that Jensen is almost there.

The ground floor hallway seems longer than the twenty meters it is and when he finally opens the door to the backyard, he has an unobstructed view of the spectacle, which means that he can see a crowd of two dozen people standing around the Punishment Place.

This barbaric device was customary in every institution and home that were proud of their lineage, though it is not used often anymore since the theocracy’s foundation some one hundred and fifty years ago. It consists solely of a ring in the ground, a simple thing but meaning though a painful death for the delinquent.

The same moment Jensen's foot hits the backyard's pavement, his back tenses up in an excruciating cramp. He moves on though, because stopping would mean Jared's death.

Jensen doesn't know why his soul mate is in this situation, he just knows that he can't stop now.
He is doubling over with another cramp only a few meters before the group of people. The first omegas are noticing him already and make room for him. They whisper and murmur, but all Jensen can see is Jared’s face smudged with tears and snot, and the blood on his shirtless back.

Jared’s eyes are too wide and there are skies and stars contained in them when he looks up, straight into Jensen’s eyes. Jensen’s heart stops beating.

The man wielding the whip is Wisdom, the black alpha, his arm raised. Cutting the air, the leather snaps and hurtles down towards Jared.

Jensen reacts and throws himself over the bound man, and the damn instrument of torture hits Jensen’s suit jacket, ripping it open and cutting into the skin.

For a perfect moment, everything makes sense. Jensen can feel it in his bones; the pain makes him see what was hidden – Morgan, Wisdom, Jared; they’re puzzle pieces sliding together to form a perfect picture. Unfortunately, the pain gets too much too soon, so Jensen’s brain shuts down, taking the body into vacation.

“He’s a traitor,” is the first thing Jared hears as he slowly comes to.

He feels amazingly good, considering the circumstances, so he assumes they gave him better drugs than the usual ones. His back hurts nevertheless so he prefers lying on his stomach.

A strong need to find Jensen, to see with his own eyes that he is alright, is thrumming through him; he doesn’t dare to move though.

Right behind the curtain surrounding his bed, behind the open infirmary door someone is talking. He can’t see them and he would prefer them not to notice him, as the manner of speaking makes him believe that it is the Bogeyman.

Of course he knows that Bogeymen don’t exist except in children’s stories. Still, he is scared shitless of the black-skinned alpha who was the one doing the talking when he came to see Miss Samantha.

Jared would hide under the bushes beneath the window and listen in on their conversations. He didn’t understand all the things that were said, but he understood the threats the alpha uttered and knew even at a young age that the promises he made were cheap.

Miss Samantha cried all too frequently after he left, so Jared would bring her a flower from the garden and she would hug him in return.

“I think he’s just misguided.” That is Morgan’s voice.

Jared’s breath hitches – a usual reaction to the ex-director’s presence since he took Jared’s virginity at the age of fourteen and then sold said virginity to the highest bidder four times.

“We can’t dispose of him now,” Morgan continues. “There were too many witnesses in the yard and
this beta bitch called the sheriff. You hurt an alpha, that's a fact, even if it happened by accident.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Not your fault. Nobody could have foreseen that this fool would stumble straight into the whip
stroke.” Morgan sighs.

“There's no way around, you'll have to confess. I'll bear witness and offer punishment in Ackles'
name. You pay a small fine and that's over and done with.”

“And what do we do now?”

After a short silence Morgan says, “I'll have a talk with Ackles, you go ransack Sheppard's office,
may he rest in peace.”
Jared can hear footsteps fading and then there is nothing to hear but his own breathing.

What did he just witness? A conspiracy to murder?

So Morgan and the Bogeyman are in cahoots together. But why would they want to see Jensen... the
director dead? Or did Jared just get the conversation the wrong way? And apparently, he tried to kill
Jensen... the director, though he still can't remember. The painful punishment he received is proof
enough – and he is lucky to still be alive.

Why? What could be the reason to kill a man who was nothing but kind to Jared, who had started
doing a great job on rearranging the Institute?

His head starts hurting over this jumble of questions. The rest of his body starts hurting too; his back,
his hip that was dislocated quite some time ago, the other hip that got scratched up while being
dragged over the floor, his wrists and arms where the Bogeyman's finger nails and the metal
restraints at the Punishment Place dug deeply into soft skin.

The Punishment Place. Never would Jared have thought that this site would still be used, even less
that he would be a very close witness to its horrid purpose. He always thought it was more like a
vague warning than an actual instrument of torture.

Every newcomer is shown the Punishment Place and told how they still used it just a few decades
ago, before the theocracy was founded, and how merciful the Alpha is to frown upon this means of
punishment. However, there are whispers that a few times a year, omegas atone bloody and painfully
for really bad crimes on sites like the one in the backyard.

And it is only now that Jared comprehends how close he was to dying – that he could be dead now if
it wasn't for Jensen.

A shadow behind the curtain makes him recoil; the curtain rings clatter and then there is no fabric
obscuring the only man Jared is longing to see,

“Jens-” he starts, but is cut off by a hard press of lips on his mouth.
Seeing Jared with shining eyes and rosy cheeks makes Jensen lose control. He just has to kiss and
taste him. Jared opens up eagerly to Jensen's probing tongue and so he finds heaven in the warmth of
Jared's mouth.

Jared's lips and skin are soft under Jensen's hands; his hair is soft, as is his body in just in the right
places, whereas it is firm in other ones.

When both are in danger of suffocating, they break apart; Jensen resting his head against Jared's
brow and cupping his lower jaw, Jared gripping Jensen's upper arms as if he never wants to let go
again.

“Are you okay?” Jensen asks, then thinks, Idiot! “I'm sorry. I know you're not okay-”

This time it is Jared's turn to keep Jensen from talking.

Jared is a damn good kisser and Jensen knows this is not his training kicking in, but this is all Jared.
He is getting hard like never before over a kiss and if he doesn't stop he'll come in his pants like a
horny little teenager.

He has to stop... any moment now... soon...
“We need to talk,” he says finally and Jared draws back, slightly frustrated.

“I know. But I don't want to,” Jared replies.

“Believe me, there are other thing's I'd rather be doing.” Jensen tries for some banter, but he'd really would prefer using his mouth for other things than talking. “Let's start with the main thing.”

Drawing a deep breath, he jumps in at the deep end; it's all or nothing. “You're my soul mate,” he says.

Jared's eyes are growing wide. He lets go of Jensen and falls back onto the bed.

“It's true,” Jensen hurries to reassure. “It's not a lie... or a ruse. We're soul mates.”

“I believe you,” Jared says and a beatific smile brightens his features. “It explains too much to not be true.”

They kiss each other again until Jared breaks lip contact and says, casting down his eyes, “But you need to know... I'm defective.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm... I don't... I don't self-lubricate.”

Jensen chuckles in relief; for a moment he was afraid Jared would tell him about some illness or disability; but this is absolutely alright. “Of course you don't.”

Taking Jared's warm hands in both of his, he says in a firm voice, “Jared, you don't self-lubricate and won't be able to bear children because you're no omega. You're an alpha.”

Jensen's soul mate – that's a wonderful word, soul mate, and is Jensen a bad man because he's grateful that he doesn't have to tell his father that he's going to mate an omega? – is visibly trying to process this information that will turn his life upside down.

“I'm an... I don't...”

“They lied to you, Jared.”

He's cupping Jared's face because he needs to feel him, needs to know he's there, alive and breathing. Jared is leaning into the touch, equally eager to feel the reassurance conveyed through Jensen's warm skin.

“I don't know the reasons yet, but Jeffrey Morgan lied to you when he said you were an omega because you're not. The vitamins you take are in fact suppressing your physical development. You need to stop taking them instantly.”

A low gasp interrupts Jensen. “The doc? He was in on it, too?”

“Yes, but they forced him by threatening his wife and kids. He tried to help you, Jared, in a way. He told me everything before he died.”

“Did I really kill him? Did I really try to kill you too?”

Jensen gently wipes away Jared's tears that are threatening to spill. “You've been drugged, Jared. Somehow, they made you assault me, but the doctor interfered and was critically injured during the struggle. He atoned for his sins and died knowing that Alpha Above will forgive him.”
Alpha will, but Jensen won't; he can't condone the crimes Sheppard committed since they hurt a wonderful person, who happens to be his mate and soul mate. He doesn't know yet what else the doctor did, but the things he knows are enough to despise the man with a vengeance.

Jared's head is too full to notice his body's aches and pains anymore. Or maybe it's the painkillers kicking in. In any case is his mind too preoccupied processing the news.

He really did attack Jensen, his soul mate. He killed the doc who had deceived him for years. Morgan was the one who plotted against him initially and forced Sheppard to help him. The Bogeyman is named Wisdom.

And Jared is an alpha.

“You need to stop taking any drugs or vitamins; Sheppard said they may kill you otherwise.”

Jensen is sitting next to Jared on the bed, sharing body heat and air with him. He holds Jared's hands between his own, caresses and pets his fingers.

Jared doesn't know how to behave, now that he is an alpha. What's the difference between alphas and omegas besides biological distinctions? Omegas are said to be more feminine due to their ability to bear children, like betas. Most omegas he met in the Institute though are anything but feminine; Osric is badass, he could kick any alpha's ass.

And he only remembers kind and caring alphas visiting his parents – though the word is that alphas are sex crazy and molest innocent children if they don't get their rocks off. That's the reason for the existence of institutes – to keep alphas satisfied.

Occasionally, he thought whether these expectations on sexes were only mind constraints, but he never dared to voice his thoughts or discuss them. His eagerness at being locked away in the solitary cell was not as strong as the curator and wardens thought.

So he just lets Jensen soothe him since it seems to help him to keep calm in return.

“My friend Ruth is here to give me a hand,” Jensen says, “but let's face it, she did all the hard work searching files and records. She's a damn good physician and, if you don't mind, she'll examine you to prove that your physiology is alpha. We'll need a doctor's certificate to take legal actions of any kind.”

Jared nods; he's okay with a beta doctor examining him. It can't be worse than all the other exams and check-ups and treatments he got from Doc Sheppard. Then he frowns; the thought of legal actions never even crossed his mind. He doesn't know yet what to think about it, but there's still time to decide on that.

“I'll submit your release papers immediately,” Jensen says. “Ruth will take you to Boston until these Augean stables have been cleared. After, we'll see what happens.”

Alpha Above, he's going to leave the Institute that has been his only home besides his parents' house.
There will be possibilities that haven't occurred to him right now, and the thought that he may have a life outside these walls leaves him breathless.

And all of Jared's sorrow and pain was caused by just one single man, Morgan. He was kind of a surrogate father during the first years at the Institute before he became...

*Morgan*

“Morgan said he wanted to talk with you,” Jared blurts out, interrupting Jensen's eloquent description of the possibilities of Jared's future.

“Why, yes, he did this morning.”

“No, I mean, he was here just a few minutes ago, standing in the hallway. I could hear him talking, and he said he wanted to *talk* with you. I'm scared though that his understanding of talking may be different than the usual one.”

“No need to be scared, Jared. He has no more power over you, and he won't dare to hurt me.”

“But he already tried to kill you using me!” How can Jensen stay this calm with the possibility of another assassination? It's beyond Jared.

“Don't worry.” Jensen's hands cradle Jared's cheeks; they are warm and reassuring, life pulsing under the skin. “Soon, the sheriff will be here. Ruth called a friend of her that's related to a judge, and I called my friend Steve, who's a journalist, and don't forget about my family. Morgan can't hurt us.”

Jared can't help but gape. That's an *army*. “But how... why do you involve so many people? You'll ruin your life and career, just because of me.”

“Well, Jared,” Jensen says smiling faintly, “when I first thought this was all about defrauding the Institute and state, I didn't want to endanger my career; but now it's about abusing omegas to make money – and they hurt you. You were never meant to live as a public server; you should have gone to an orphanage, found a new loving foster home. What Morgan did to you is a crime I never dreamed of being possible and I still don't know his motives or if there are other victims. I need to see him penalized.”

Guiding Jared's hand to his lips, Jensen brushes a tender kiss on it. “I have to go now,” he sighs. “Don't worry, I'll send the nurses or your friends to keep you company. Morgan won't have a chance to hurt you.”

Jared nods and, with a last sweet kiss, Jensen leaves.

This is too much to understand. Half of Jared's life has been a lie and now, everything will change.

He will change.

He won't – he *can't* stay the same person now that he knows he is alpha – and he still can't believe it entirely. He believes though that Jensen is his soul mate; that fact is written in his heart.

Burying his face in the pillows, Jared breathes deeply; there is still some of Jensen's scent sticking onto the fabric, enough to make him happy and soothe his aching back.

Then, Jared's eyes are flying open; he knows someone is there.

It is the Bogeyman, Wisdom, standing next to Jared's bed.
When Jensen enters his office, Morgan is already there, sipping coffee like he was at home.

Jensen just had a talk with Ruth about their future actions; stating Jared's sex, where to take him once he is free, who to call. His mind is reeling with the possibilities that he can offer his mate now that he is alpha and the legal omega restrictions don't apply to him anymore.

Morgan's presence takes him by surprise; he would have wished for a little more time, but he'll make do.

“Senator,” he says coolly.

“Jensen,” Morgan replies and Jensen feels almost offended by the implied familiarity.

After hesitating at the door for a minute, he decides on sitting in the chair behind the desk; after all, this is still Jensen's office and he won't let get the bastard to him.

“Well,” he begins, “I assume your visit didn't obtain the results you were aiming for.”

Morgan's grin is smug, for lack of a better word.

“Yeah, maybe it looks like from the outside. But I assure you I haven't shot my bolt.”

“You tried to have me killed.”

The senator's face is a picture of indignant astonishment. “I'm hurt that you think so low of me. I'd never sin the way you accuse me of. Other than that, it was a server who attacked you and killed poor Doctor Sheppard.”

“I know for sure Jared has no motive to harm me nor the doctor; I'm positive we will detect drugs in the blood sample Doctor Connell took.”

“Ruth Connell?” Morgan responds derogatively. “She's just a beta bitch, no one will believe her.”

“I won't discuss her professional credibility with you, Senator. There's more proof of your crimes; Doctor Sheppard ensured to keep tab on them.”

The scowl darkening Morgan's features for an instant is balm for Jensen's soul. He leans back in his chair, trying to convey his determination.

Putting his still half-full cup of coffee on the floor, the senator crosses his legs and steeples his fingers.

“So, what do you want from me, Mister Ackles? Money, an advancement? Power?”

“I want you to confess. I want you to say that you treated Jared Padalecki as a public omega server even though he is alpha and was only ten years old when he ended up in this institute.

“I want you to say that you bribed Doctor Sheppard into declaring Jared omega and suppressing his
natural development with drugs that are dangerous to his health.

“But principally, I want you to tell me the reason. Why did you make huge efforts to have a little boy vanish into thin air, making him into someone he's not?”

Morgan is fidgeting in his chair; he seems to be uncomfortable and barely keeping his cool.

“If you stop stirring up this hornets' nest, I can make you rich beyond imagination. You can be a Senior Senator in less than ten years. Wouldn't you like that?”

Jensen doesn't need to even think a second about his reply.

“Yes. But I want to gain a position by my own efforts, not because you bribed me to keep my mouth shut.”

“Allright,” Morgan says, leaning forward and flashing his eyes at Jensen, “Let's phrase it differently. If you don't cease your struggles to drag my good name through the dirt, you'll be up against Beaver, and believe me, you don't want him to be your enemy.”

Holy shit.

“Holy shit. You mean Beaver as in Jim Beaver, Reverend Senior Senator Jim Beaver?”
Jared scrambles back against the headboard, farthest as possible from the Bogeyman, breaking out in a cold sweat. *Wisdom* – he has a name now that makes him all human, but doesn't help Jared with being scared – is looking down on him unmoving with his dark eyes glistening in the low lighting.

“Wh-what do you want?” he stammers.

“You grew up very handsome,” Wisdom replies, but doesn't answer the question.

The comment makes Jared turn pale. If Wisdom has set his mind on raping him, he wouldn't have a chance.

“You know, it always hurt me to do this to you,” he says and sits down into the chair next to the bed. He stretches his legs and crosses his ankles casually.

“Yet you did.” Jared can't keep his voice steady, fear and apprehension bleeding through.

“It was imperative. Society's welfare was depending on your life, but Mister Morgan didn't let me kill you because he was enamored by your scrawny ass and big brown eyes. And then Sheppard made sure to never leave me alone with you.”
Jared's breath hitches. He's talking to an honest-to-goodness hitman.

“My life? B-but why...”

“You know whose fault it is that you're nothing but a glorified whore now? Your parents'! Those unrepentant heretics didn't want to see reason. They didn't listen to what I said; they even rejected Misters Morgan and Beaver's arguments. I'm sorry I had to kill them, but it was inevitable.”

Of all the questions swirling in Jared's mind, this one leaves his mouth. “But it was an accident...”

“That's what everyone thinks.” Wisdom is grinning smugly, sobering up soon though. “Believe me, I never wanted to hurt an omega child. Omegas are precious creatures; they're worth being cherished, but they need to know their place.”

“I'm not omega,” Jared breathes, barely audible over his own pulse beating noisily through his veins.

“You're not...?” Wisdom seems genuinely surprised.

“No, I'm alpha. Morgan and everyone lied to me.”

“Huh. Looks like you're not the only one he deceived.”

There is a short, awkward pause. The black alpha seems to gather his thoughts, then continues, “Well, the world changed a lot in the last ten years, with the beta rights movement's success and the omega copycats gaining momentum. And with Ackles prying into the affair, I don't see a reason to keep it a secret any longer. He will prove to the court that the Padalecki son is still alive, so you'll be able to come into your inheritance, and if I kill you, he'll inherit it since he's your soul mate. He's quite persistent when it comes to causing trouble, isn't he? You know, Doctor Sheppard kept proof about you and Mister Morgan's involvement hidden and Ackles found it.”

“What's this all about?” Jared dares asking. His life got tilted sideways and upside down for the second time in less than an hour, and he still doesn't know why.

Wisdom is looking straight at him, his dark eyes scrutinizing Jared until he starts fidgeting.

“Ah well, I don't think it will change a single thing. Everything's lost and the sky will come down upon us soon enough.

“Your parents found proof that the Book has been misinterpreted since the beginning. No evidence can be found in there that alphas are superior to the other sexes, and your parents compiled information until there was no doubt about it. Don't get me wrong, they weren't the first ones who found out about it, but they're the first ones finally succeeding in making it public.”

Shrugging, Wisdom adds almost like an afterthought, “Maybe time has come; it seems as if the Alpha wants us to fail this time, considering all the mistakes we made and the serendipities that occurred. After all, soul mates happen for a reason that you can't fight.”

For a minute, there is silence.

Jared is thinking too hard, jerking when Wisdom stands abruptly.

“Have a good life,” the alpha says and somehow he has lost the bigger part of his larger-than-life size, looking tired. “Know that this society's fate is on your shoulders now. Knowledge is power, use it wisely.”
He leaves Jared sitting on his bed, holding the shreds of his life in hands. In these remains though, there is a little bud, a new life, that strives to blossom.

Impossible. Reverend Senior Senator Beaver is the theocracy's highest ranking man, apart from Presiding Pope Timothy Omundson.

The smugness returns in Morgan's smirk when he nods in the affirmative. Maybe he thinks the tide has turned.

“So you just dragged Beaver into this mess only to save your own sorry ass?” Jensen asks incredulously.

“I didn't drag him into it, it was his idea all along. We had to act in order to save the state, the church and the whole damn society from a bunch of heretics. He wanted to have Jared killed too, but I took pity on the little boy.”

Getting up from his chair, Morgan draws himself up to his full height, tries to tower over Jensen, but falls short on him. This trick never even worked from Jensen's father, so there is no reason it would work from the senator.

“You see, Jensen,” Morgan says, “if you choose this fight, you'll lose. You'll go against highest authorities risking damnation until end of time. So have a word to the wise: take the money I offer and run.”

Jensen leans back in his chair, a picture of calm and self-confidence.

“You see, Senator,” he says, “I always thought of myself as an honest person. If I'd take your money, I'm sure I'd never be able to look into a mirror. Besides, I wouldn't live long enough to spend a dime, not after what you just told me.”

Unfortunately, Morgan still withheld the motive for his and Beaver's nasty crime – and who knows who else might be involved – but it was enough. Jensen has what he wanted.

“Did you hear it, Ruthie?” Jensen calls out loud enough for Ruth in the en-suite bathroom. It has a door not only to Jensen's office, but also to his apartment so his friend could enter unnoticed and hide in the bathroom.

Opening the door, she enters the office. As Jensen knows her, he can see the nervousness hidden under her composed appearance. Brandishing a phone, she says, “I heard it all, and so did Reverend Judge Miller on the phone and Sheriff Manns in the next room.”

Morgan pales. Clearly, he is in over his head now and with the information he just provided, he'll need a good explanation. A very good one.

The sheriff follows Ruth into the room. Obviously, he is uncomfortable with the situation, and who can blame him? He's a better law enforcement officer than Jensen thought since he approaches
Morgan, saying politely but firmly, “Senator Morgan, I'm sorry to fulfill my duty, but I'm asking you to not put up resistance.”

Morgan's complexion is slowly changing into an angry blush; all he is doing though, is staring angrily at Jensen as the sheriff cuffs him and takes him into custody for abuse of authority and conspiracy.

Jensen is watching with an incredible feeling of satisfaction. There will be more charges against Morgan, Beaver, Wisdom and who knows who else involved in this complot. Maybe it means taking the government down, but Jensen will do it without batting an eye if it means keeping Jared safe. He can't imagine what will happen next, what scandals will evolve from his need to protect his soul mate. He will need all the help he can get.

Jensen needs to call his father.

“You just got the senator busted, Jensen,” Ruth says, taking his mind off things.

He can't help but smile at her, clasping her in his arms. “You've been helping me,” he replies.

“Yeah, well, if the shit hits the fan, I can still return to Europe. I have friends in Spain and Great Ireland that will help me get a good job. But you... all you've ever wanted was to be a statesman, and you just closed that door for good.”

“Yes, that's true. I dreamt of being a senator since I was a little alpha boy, but I never wanted to sell my soul on the way. That's just not happening.”

Ruth is looking up at him and smiles impishly.

“And so you risk a social and clerical and political revolution just because you're in love?”

Jensen smiles back. “Not yet. But soul mates happen for a reason and everyone knows that you can't fight it.”
Epilogue

“How is sex?” Osric asks, and Jared blushes a deep crimson.

His reaction is quite surprising, considering his past, but his relationship with Jensen is something he tries to keep private. Of course, talking only occasionally on the phone for almost a year doesn't mean Osric's curiosity has been satisfied sufficiently.

“Nice,” Jared replies, “it's... nice.”

Osric laughs like he never did at the Institute – unburdened.

Unintentionally grinning, Jared stirs in his coffee. Being Jensen Ackles' mate has its perks; he can have coffee now whenever he wants, and on some memorable occasions, Jensen even managed to include it in their own *constructive recreation*, but he still knows better than to tell his friend about it.

“How about you?” he tries to change the subject.

Jared's question makes Osric's eyes light up. “Regularly and hot.”

Eyes growing wide, Jared leans forward. “Do tell!”
Now it is Osric's turn to blush. “It's Matt. He's a great guy when he's not threatened by punishment.”

“Matt? But how... you can't rent as an omega couple, where do you live?”

Waving his hands, Osric explains. “Officially, we're both living with Misha, you know, the cook? He's relocating his business here, to Boston, and will set up a restaurant and a culinary school soon. He’ll take everyone with him that wants to come.”

“Everyone?”

Osric chuckles. “Yeah, he employs half of our former co-workers. And when I've finished training, he’s going to hire me as a fully-fledged accountant. And do you know the reason why he's moving to Boston?”

Jared shakes his head and takes a sip of coffee.

“Ruth.”

Sipping the brew is not a good idea; he splutters it all over his knees. “You mean, Ruth like in Doctor Connell? Misha and Ruth?”

Osric's head is bobbing eagerly in affirmation.

Now that's some news; Jared can't help grinning. He gets serious though when Osric asks, “How about you guys? How about that job offer from Europe you mentioned last time?”

“We're going to move to Sicily in three months. PELEA, that's the Pan-European Law Enforcement Agency -” Osric nods, he has apparently heard of them, “they offered a commissionership to Jensen; they want him to build up a division to investigate and prosecute crimes against omegas all over Europe. And I can work with the victims as soon as I'm a fully qualified counselor.”

His friend looks at him, smiling happily about the future prospects that both of them never dared to dream of.

“You know,” Osric says lost in thought, “I'd never thought Jensen Ackles would change the lives of so many people, let alone take apart our nation, when he entered the Institute for the first time. You really never know why the Alpha chooses certain individuals as soul mates until it's obvious.”

Jensen is working in his home office; he needs to complete different projects before their emigration, and working from home is safer, considering the last week’s attempt on his life that Jared doesn't even know about.

That's another reason to accept the offer from overseas, his life is becoming more dangerous, and he can't expose Jared and his family to danger knowingly. It's only a few weeks more, then they'll be beyond reach of the ultraconservative Alphaistic Movement.

They don't want things to change, claiming that it is Alpha's Will how they are, even though it is a proven fact now that the supremacy of one single sex is only based on misconception and manipulation through the members of said sex. Jensen can absolutely understand where they come from; if it wasn't for Jared and a vast number of omegas that are hit hard by unfair laws – and if he'd never accepted the position at the Institute – he most likely wouldn't want changes either. Being a
pampered alpha has a lot of perks, and who in his right mind would want to lose them?

But as it is, he can't wait for the trial to end, for this whole ugly cesspool to be cleaned and purged. Beaver, Morgan and their accomplices made the mistake of acting against an alpha. If Jared actually had been an omega, there would have been only minor repercussions, but since Jared is alpha and they committed crimes against hundreds more – as investigations brought to light – there is no way for them to go scot-free.

On the other side, there are many supporters that are alpha and perceive the social conditions as unfair on omegas and betas the same way as Jensen does. And that is the thing that gives him hope: that most people are decent enough to relinquish their comforts in order to make other people's lives better.

There's a knock on the office door and Jared enters without waiting for him to respond. He always seems to know when to enter without being asked, but of course that's easy due to their bond. There's always this gut feeling that says how the other one is; by now, Jensen has learned to take no notice of it when working though, otherwise he'd never be able to get anything done.

Jared strides leisurely through the office, his pants riding low on his hips. There's just this stripe of skin visible, and Jensen's mouth goes dry.

He still can't believe how gorgeous Jared is. Since his ordeal, after discontinuing the medication, he grew more than an inch and filled out some. He's not the lanky, malnourished boy anymore that he once was, but a tall and healthy man.
He sits down on the edge of the desk and leans down on his arms behind him, waiting for Jensen to react.
Jensen complies gladly, moving between Jared's long spread legs and gripping his hips with sure fingers.

“Your parents will be here in an hour and a half,” Jared says.

“I know.”

“I want to take a shower.”

“Hm,” Jensen hums and nuzzles at Jared's neck and chin, breathing in that intoxicating scent that is all Jared and home and mate.

“I thought about getting dirty before so it's worth it.” Jared grins
Jensen blinks at him, taking in that sweet smile and the glistening hazel eyes. He can feel Jared's lust as well as his own in his guts.

“I think I can help with getting both of us dirty,” he replies.

-fin-

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