United We Mend

by KouriArashi

Summary

Sequel to Divided We Stand. Six months have gone by, Stiles is slowly recovering from his injuries, and the Searching Ceremony is about to happen. This time it's Cora who brings someone home, but he might not be what he seems...

Notes

Gosh! Hello! I love you all! Everyone was so wonderful and kind and encouraging, and so many people wanted a sequel so badly, and I told you all "I'll write one if I get a good idea". Well, here's hoping this idea is good.... ^_^

There will be a Cora pairing added to the tags later, but for now it will remain shrouded in mystery.

So this starts about 8 months after the end of Divided We Stand. I don't really have many warnings that aren't in the tags, but I do want to put out there that there will probably be some triggering issues around the subject of mental disability/long-term recovery, and there will be angst about this (as would be healthy, really). So if that sort of thing bothers you, this fic might bother you. But I do love my bbies and plan to give this a happy ending. *just puts that out there to start*
This chapter is a little bit of an info dump, to cover the time in between the two fics.... I was originally going to do a short-fic to bridge them together where Stiles gets interviewed by Ellen or something but eventually came to the conclusion that I haven't watched anywhere near enough news/talk shows/interview shows to pull that off with finesse. That's okay. Papa Stilinski is here to see you through.

Hope you enjoy!
Chapter 1

Dr. Eleanor Kuan is a petite woman who has a perpetual ‘I do not tolerate bullshit’ look on her face, which impressed Tom Stilinski the moment he met her, and has continued to impress him ever since. She’s a disciplinarian who can be understanding, a psychologist who can be firm, and above all else, a teacher who knows her students.

“Sheriff, thanks for coming,” she says, standing up to shake his hand. “Is Mrs. Hale going to be joining us, do you know?”

“She said she would be,” Tom says. He gave up a long time previous on trying to get Dr. Kuan to call him Tom. She preferred to stay formal with the parents, with everyone, really. “It’s a really busy week for her, though.”

“I do apologize for the timing,” Kuan says, with a nod, “but I didn’t really want to let this wait.”

Tom grimaces a little at that and tries to pretend that he isn’t ready to climb out of his skin. In some ways, Stiles does take after him, and they both hate being left in the dark or left waiting for information. He imagines that Stiles is going to freak out when he hears that this meeting took place, but that’s something he can tackle at a later date. Since Kuan obviously isn’t going to start until Talia is there, he strikes up a conversation about the upcoming Searching Ceremonies that are keeping the alpha so busy.

Talia rushes in ten minutes late, clearly a little flustered. “I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting,” she says, shaking Kuan’s hand and then giving Tom a brief embrace. Like his son, it had taken Tom some time to get used to the casual touching that came part and parcel with a werewolf pack. Now their greetings were as natural as breathing.

“Thank you both for coming,” Kuan says, taking her seat. She dons a little pair of reading glasses and looks down at a page of notes she’s made. “As you know, we are entering the fourth week of the new semester, and I wanted to discuss Stiles’ progress with you both.”

Tom nods, but he’s tense, and he knows that both the alpha and the woman across from him can sense it. Kuan probably would have just e-mailed them if everything had been okay, so the fact that they’re being dragged down here isn’t a good sign.

“His grades are good,” Kuan says, flipping through her notes. “We did have to take him out of physics, as you suspected we would, Sheriff. We put him in a biology class instead.”

Tom nods again. It hadn’t come up much during that first summer after Stiles had been shot, but upon his reentrance to school, they had realized he had a lot of difficulty with numbers. The school had taken him out of math, and at the time he had been on a light schedule, half-days, so it hadn’t been a big deal. “How’s he doing in it?”

“Quite well, actually,” Kuan says. “It’s an advanced class – normally for seniors – but of course Stiles is quite bright, so he hasn’t had any trouble there.” She flips through her notes. “Math was replaced with an extra English credit.”

“That was the expository writing class?” Talia asks, and Kuan nods. They hadn’t been sure about that class, but Stiles did fine with writing as long as he was given time to think about the words he needed. The teacher had said he rarely did timed assignments such as in-class essays, and in
deference to Stiles had decided he would avoid them altogether for the class, so he wouldn’t feel singled out.

“It’s mostly history that’s the problem,” Kuan says. “He didn’t have that last semester, when he was still on half-days. He’s in the modern history class. They started with World War One and Ms. Ricci says he has a great deal of trouble remembering the names of the countries and the people involved. She’s working with one of the other professors to make his testing less ‘memorize names and dates’ and more ‘explain to me why a particular event is important’. He’s done much better since she implemented that change.”

“That’s good,” Tom says, feeling uncertain. He’s not sure why Kuan called the meeting, and all this praise is making him conversely even more nervous, like she’s softening them up before landing the punishing blow.

Talia doesn’t have much more patience. “Dr. Kuan, I’m sorry to be blunt, but I’m on a very tight schedule right now. What is your concern?”

Kuan folds her hands in front of herself. “I’m concerned that Stiles is growing extremely depressed.”

Tom and Talia exchange a look. Tom carefully takes in a breath and lets it out. “Could you elaborate, please?”

“Your son is obviously very intelligent, Sheriff. My guess is that schoolwork has always come easily to him. Or at least, it did once he was put on medication for his ADD. Yes, his grades are good. No parent would be ashamed of them. But he’s having to work three times harder for them than he ever has in his life before. And it isn’t just that. He’s aware of the special accommodations and . . . he feels singled out. Embarrassed. He doesn’t like getting different assignments that cater to his disabilities. Several of the teachers have noticed.”

“Nobody’s giving him a hard time, are they?” Talia asks, her voice cold as steel.

“Of course not,” Kuan said. “I wouldn’t allow it, but even then, nobody would. Everyone in this school knows why Stiles has the issues he has. The students are all very good to him. The older ones treat him like a mascot, and the younger ones look up to him as some sort of god.”

“As usual, Stiles is harder on himself than anyone,” Tom says, pushing his hands through his hair. He isn’t surprised by any of this. Stiles had been chomping at the bit to get back to full-time classes, but since he started, he’s been suspiciously quiet about them.

“Stiles has had a lot to deal with,” Kuan agrees, “and I think he pictured this going a little better than it has. Last semester he was only taking three classes, all of them specifically chosen to work around his disabilities. This is the first time the reality of it is hitting home for him. I don’t think we need to panic or rush to any conclusions, but I wanted you to be aware of his situation.” She hesitates, then says, “One comment in particular bothered Ms. Ricci, and she asked me to report it to you. Some students were discussing the upcoming ceremonies, and Stiles made a comment about how lucky it is he has the pack to take care of him, since he ‘obviously’ won’t be able to hold down a job. His words, not mine.”

“Oh, hell,” Tom says, with a sigh. “God, we’ve been over this and over this . . .”

Talia reaches out and squeezes his shoulder. “We’ll figure something out. Like Dr. Kuan said, he’s still getting back into the swing of things. Let’s not push him too hard. He’ll only get his back up if we do.”
“This from you?” Tom says, amused despite himself. “I guess you’re finally figuring Stiles out.”

“A little bit at a time,” Talia says.

Kuan thanks them for coming, and they leave her office. “Coffee?” Tom asks, thinking that they could talk about strategy.

“I can’t,” Talia says, apologetically. “I have so many things to do, I just – my head is going in eighty different directions right now. After the ceremonies on Friday – let’s have lunch over the weekend and we can talk about this.”

“Okay,” Tom says. He wants to flail and protest and say that his kid has priority, but he knows how hard Talia – and Stiles himself, for that matter – have worked to put together the Searching Ceremonies this year. A lot of different factions had argued to call them off completely for the year while they continued to work on re-educating the public and re-organizing the system, but Talia said that would be taken as a defeat.

It’s been just over six months since Kate Argent had tried to kill the entire Hale family and one of her lackeys had succeeded in shooting Stiles. For Stiles, the shine of being a celebrity had worn off quickly. He had gotten to appear on Good Morning America and meet Ellen Degeneres and Jon Stewart, which had been the highlight of his life, but a lot of the press kept asking questions he was uncomfortable with, and after the first month, he had declared he was done giving interviews and was going back to life as usual.

‘Life as usual’ for a while had been a lot of therapy, both physical and mental. And there were days when he was fine. He could sit and read for hours without pause; if he stumbled across a word that gave him trouble, he could usually figure it out from context. Laura and Derek helped with his physical therapy, and the pack kept him insulated from most of the things that would have upset him.

The problem with his memory was mostly short-term data retention. He had no difficulty remembering things he had known before the shooting, but too much new information would give him trouble. But for the most part, it simply didn’t come up. They had carefully chosen his three classes for the new semester – a literature course since his reading comprehension was still fine, a science class that was a combination of geology and geography, both things he already knew a lot about, and a class that Stiles had termed ‘intro to werewolves’ which focused on the culture differences between humans and werewolves. Again, a subject he knew a lot about and was keenly interested in. He had also had the math class, but Dr. Kuan had pulled him out of it after three weeks due to intense frustration on everyone’s part. Stiles could learn it, go through a problem with his tutor and understand it perfectly, but when he got to the next problem – an identical concept but with different data – it was like he had never seen it before.

Tom had been in favor of another semester of half-days, but physically he was cleared to get back to a full schedule, and Stiles had been anxious to get back to normal. Now Tom is wishing that he had pushed the issue a little harder.

It isn’t like Stiles doesn’t have enough to do. He’s still the denmaker, and he spends a lot of time in the Hale family kitchen. He’s even taking a class on it that the school offers – he had laughed at the idea at first, but it’s the one class he actually talks about. It offers tips for cooking for large groups, nutritional information, even shopping strategies.

In between all that, he’s taken a large part of the new Searching Ceremonies onto his plate. As the person most familiar with all the misinformation that travels the human world, he’s been vital in making sure Talia knows what needs to get straightened out, and how. In addition to the ‘terms and
conditions’ that people had to sign before they could enter the pool, Talia had put together an educational seminar the weekend before the ceremonies themselves. It had both human and werewolf speakers and focused not only on the benefits but also the disadvantages to being part of a pack. They had even allowed an anti-werewolf group – not the WLO, which had been dismantled, but a milder group – to make a video and promised it would be displayed at the seminar.

Tom had been there when the pack had watched the video, and seen a lot of rolling eyes, but agreed with them that it wasn’t that bad. It focused mainly on the drawbacks of having to learn to control the shift and be on constant guard against shifting by accident. Of course, a chosen mate wasn’t required to become a werewolf, but that didn’t seem to have bothered whoever made the video.

After the seminar, each entrant was required to choose one of three categories. They were willing to let a werewolf lay claim with no questions asked, they were willing to be claimed but reserved the right to withdraw after meeting the pack, or they were only willing to do the meet and greet and would negotiate further terms with any werewolf that expressed interest in them from there. Each category came with a wristband – green, yellow, or orange. Stiles had jokingly called them stop-light bracelets, which was basically what they were.

Basically, the idea was that everything needed to be taken slower. A lot of the educational articles and conferences that had been held in the last year had helped dispel the myths that went along with the ceremonies. But not everyone watched those conferences, and some people thought they were staged. There’s not much they can do about the latter, but Talia is determined to have everyone going into the ceremonies be as informed as possible.

Cora is the only Hale pack member who will be attending this year, and Talia has made it clear to her that she’s not required or expected to choose anybody. If that has Derek a little irritated at her, well, she can hardly blame him. But the pack has been growing, slow and steady, and she’s not about to complain.

Stiles and Derek have agreed that children are probably unlikely for the two of them. Their attitudes might change, Tom supposes, but he frankly doubts it. Derek is fairly adamant about it, and while Stiles was ambivalent before, the idea of child-rearing on top of denmaking causes him no small amount of concern. Add his mental disabilities to that, and he simply isn’t interested.

But Stiles’ entry into the pack had made it grow in another, unexpected way, when he had asked Talia about Scott. In October, Scott had been hospitalized with a nasty case of double pneumonia, and that had finally given Stiles the courage to approach Talia about turning him and bringing him into the pack. Scott was at the Hale house two or three nights a week anyway; he was Stiles’ best friend, his brother, and everyone liked him.

At the time, Talia had been somewhat uncertain. “It isn’t normally done that way,” she said. “We can’t go turning anyone we like and increasing our pack’s power. But given the circumstances . . . well, Scott is basically your brother, and his illness . . . let me talk to some of the other alphas in the area and I’ll see what I can do. Providing that both Scott and his mother are willing, of course.”

So she had talked to some people and Melissa had been okay with it and the day before Thanksgiving, Scott was officially turned and became the newest member of the Hale pack. With Scott came Allison, and given that they were probably going to be making the world’s most beautiful babies once they got out of college, they would add to the Hale pack in numbers, despite not being genetically related.

Allison’s entry had been an interesting matter. She was Scott’s mate, and nobody was about to argue with that. In fact, none of the Hale pack really had a problem with her. There was no
evidence that she had been involved with the WLO, and Stiles was adamant that it was Allison’s words that had led to him actually giving the pack a chance in the first place. Some of the other werewolves in the territory weren’t so sure about it, but Talia had pledged herself for Allison’s conduct, and at that, they let it go.

No, the problem had come from the Argent side. Chris had thrown a small fit at the idea of Allison actually dating a werewolf, let alone being part of a pack. Allison told him to go suck an egg. It looked like things were headed for disaster until Melissa intervened. Calm, rational Melissa, who had challenged Chris to spend one evening with the pack and see if he couldn’t deal with some of his preconceived notions about werewolves.

Chris and Victoria had grudgingly agreed. Stiles made lasagna; they ate and then watched a movie in the Hale’s gigantic new living room. The only pack member who hadn’t attended was Peter. He was willing to come, but everyone thought it for the best if he didn’t. Given that it was altogether too likely that Peter would greet Chris with, “It’s so nice to finally meet you; I really enjoyed killing your sister”, it was in everyone’s best interest if the two simply never crossed paths.

(Incidentally, the first time Peter and Allison had met after the incident, Peter had taken both her hands in his and gravely told her, “I’m sorry that you lost your aunt”. He was completely sincere; although he in no way regretted killing Kate Argent, he was sorry that Allison had lost a family member that she cared about, despite her faults. Peter and Allison had been wary of each other for a little while, but after Scott’s formal introduction into the pack, they had gradually gotten used to each other.)

It wasn’t that werewolves weren’t people, Chris said, or didn’t have feelings. He just viewed them as ticking time bombs, guaranteed to eventually lose control, and thought that they should be segregated from the rest of society, so at least they would only hurt each other when that happened. “That’s a hell of an argument from someone whose sister murdered a bunch of innocent children,” Tom was the only one ballsy enough to say. Chris grimaced and agreed that humans could, indeed, be just as bad.

In the end, Chris agreed to meet Allison halfway. He didn’t approve of her choices, but they were her choices to make. He wasn’t going to sign anything, but he wouldn’t stop her from dating Scott or disown her for joining a pack.

Officially, then, Allison had to wait until her eighteenth birthday before she could join. But she was already a member in all but name, and nobody had a problem waiting on the formalities.

With Scott came Melissa, and of course Tom spent a lot of evenings at the Hale house as well. So the pack had gone from nine members (counting Laura’s two young children) to fourteen, and Talia could find no reason to complain.

Tom is right there with her. Stiles has good days now, a lot of them, where he never loses words or forgets things that people had just said. His neurologist said he would probably continue to improve, that recovering brain function took time, particularly after trauma. “It can often take up to two years or even longer to see as much improvement as you’re going to get.” he said. “And sometimes things don’t start to improve until you actually start working on them again.”

So Tom is hopeful that things at school will get better. Stiles is exercising his brain, and it just needs to get used to the workload. It’s just a bump in the road. Now if only he can get Stiles to believe that, everything will be okay.
Derek takes a deep breath as he enters the house, and takes a few moments just to savor it. The scent of pack, of family, the faint smell of the new wooden flooring and the paint that’s barely been dry a month, the scents drifting from the kitchen of herbs and spices. The scent of Stiles, which he can catch in even the smallest amounts.

He goes into the kitchen despite being filthy and sees Stiles at the counter, chopping vegetables for a salad. He’s smiling as he looks up, and says, “Hey.”

“Hey,” Derek says in reply. He leans in to brush a kiss over the back of Stiles’ neck, not going in for a full embrace because he just got home from work and he’s covered in dirt and sweat. “That smells amazing.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says. “I made it last night and had Laura turn the crock pot on at noon. Amazingly, she managed to do that without ruining what was inside.”

“A shock,” Derek agrees seriously. Laura’s ineptitude in the kitchen is a running joke. “Looks like you made enough to feed a small army.”

“Yeah. Gonna be a full house for dinner.”

Derek can hear tension in the words, and he isn’t sure where it’s coming from. He rubs a hand up and down Stiles’ back absently, thinking about whether or not he wants to ask. Sometimes it seems unfair to acknowledge the tension he can sense in Stiles’ shoulders and his scent if Stiles doesn’t say anything about it, since Stiles doesn’t have the same senses. He decides to settle for a middle approach. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, half-turning to glance at him. “Talia and my dad were going to meet with Dr. Kuan after school. They think I don’t know about it but my history teacher let something slip.”

“Ah.” Derek’s thumb traces over the short hairs at the back of Stiles’ neck. He’s been growing his hair out, which Derek likes. It gives him something to hold onto when Stiles is, well. Doing things best not thought about in the kitchen. “Do you know why?”

“Not sure. Probably about the fact that they switched my science class or that I had to take my last history quiz open book because I keep confusing Belgium and the Netherlands.”

Stiles’ voice is light and casual; it’s obvious that he doesn’t want to discuss this in detail. At least, not in the kitchen. So Derek lets it drop, at least for now. “I’m going to go shower. I’ll be back in about twenty, okay?”

“Okay,” Stiles says, and goes back to his chopping. He and Derek came to an agreement not long after Stiles had started classes again that his grades weren’t Derek’s business. Derek was his mate, his boyfriend, not his father. Stiles has a father to worry about his performance in school. When he wants to rant or complain or just vent his frustrations, Derek will always listen. But in general, school is something they don’t talk about much.

By the time he gets back downstairs, the house is full of people. Cora is chattering with Scott while they set the table. Allison is filling glasses with water while Laura gets Tyler’s bib on. The adults are in a cluster on one side of the room, less Peter, who is nowhere to be seen. There’s a place set for him on Talia’s left, as there always is. Aaron will be at her right, and Tom has taken Laura’s typical place at the other end of the table. Melissa is at his right with Stiles at his left. Derek takes
the place next to Stiles, and everyone else fills in the middle.

As usual, dinner is a loud, boisterous affair. There are too many people to have only one conversation going on, and Derek likes to sit in the middle, listening to Scott and Stiles talk about a new video game on one side, and Laura and Jonathan talk about Tyler’s new tooth coming in on the other. Further down, Talia and Aaron are talking about security at the Searching Ceremonies. His mother looks tired, but not in an unhappy sort of way. A busy tired. It’s a look he’s familiar with.

Whatever the meeting at school was about, it can’t have been dire, because neither Tom nor Talia seem particularly troubled. Derek sees Tom give his son a few sideways glances here and there, but he doesn’t say anything. Derek doesn’t ask. It’s not his business, not until Stiles decides to tell him about it.

When Talia does address him, it’s about something different. “Oh, Stiles, about Friday,” she says. “I thought something simple would be good. We don’t know how long Cora will be at the high school, and of course I’m going to be there to make sure things are running smoothly. I assume Peter will be, too,” she adds, glancing at her brother’s empty chair but not commenting on his absence. “We may eat at different times. And if Cora does bring someone home, casual would be better. We wouldn’t want to overwhelm him.”

Stiles nods. “Okay, I’ll just go down to Midwestern Meats and pick up nineteen tons of deli meat,” he says. “Work up a few veggie trays and stuff.”

“Sounds good,” Talia says.

They’re mostly done eating by then, so Derek says, “Am I on dish duty tonight?”

“Nope, it’s me and Allison,” Scott says.

“I’ll get the food put away,” Laura says. This is her perpetual job; she may be incompetent with a wooden spoon, but she’s a demon with a roll of Saran-Wrap. This is good, since Stiles always manages to get it tangled in his (obscenely long) fingers, make it stick to itself, and otherwise be unruly. The first time he had wrapped up leftovers, they had resembled a translucent football.

Jonathan looks doubtfully at Tyler’s face where it’s smeared with chili, and says, “I may need help giving him his bath.”


Since they seem to be off the hook, Derek turns to Stiles and says, “Do you have a lot of homework? We could watch a movie.”

“Did it already,” Stiles says, stiffening at the mention of schoolwork. The werewolves at the table politely pretend not to notice. “I have some e-mails I want to answer, but after that, I’m all yours.” He distracts everyone from school by wiggling his eyebrows at Derek salaciously. Cora starts to giggle again.

“Okay.” Derek leans over and rubs his cheek and jaw over Stiles’ hair, thoroughly marking him. Right now, after the hour in the dining room, Stiles smells like pack, and that’s good. But he wants Stiles to smell like him for a little while. Stiles smiles up at him, bright and happy and genuine, in that way that worms right inside Derek’s heart and makes a home there.

They wish Scott and Allison good luck with the dishes and head upstairs. They’ll probably leave afterwards; Allison’s parents like her home at night, and Melissa typically goes home because it’s
more convenient for her to go to work in the morning, as the preserve is a ways out of town. Scott sometimes stays the night and sometimes doesn’t. On a night like this, where Derek has made it unequivocally clear that he will not be sharing Stiles, he’ll accompany his mother.

The pack is getting large enough now that Derek has heard his parents talk about how much longer they can logistically keep it in one house. It’s common for smaller packs to live in the same house, but larger packs typically have a commune, several houses on the same land. That’s one of the reasons why they live on the preserve: more room to build.

Beyond that, Derek knows that there’s caution at the heart of this decision. If the Hale pack hadn’t all lived in the same house at the time of the fire, more of them might have survived. But Talia and her two siblings were so close that it seemed natural to them to live in the same house, even though all three were married and had children, or in Peter’s case, were about to. It still feels natural now, but it’s also awkward having so many alpha personalities butting heads in the same house. Stiles will be going to college in a year and a half, but Laura and Jonathan will probably want their own place sooner rather than later.

“Whatcha thinkin’ ‘bout?” Stiles asks, as he goes into Derek’s room – their room, Derek silently corrects, and tries not to smile like an idiot. It’s set up the same as his last one was, with the large bed and the huge shelving unit along one wall adorned with books and plants of every variety. His plants had survived the Argent incident, and Deaton had removed them from the house and thoroughly cleaned each one off from all the wolfsbane, repotted them in fresh soil, and returned them. His book collection had not been so lucky. He’d been putting it back together slowly. But there are other parts of the room that are unmistakably Stiles’ now, like the corkboard on one wall, the sprawling pile of video games, the laptop docking station on the desk.

“Rebuilding,” Derek says, sprawling onto the bed. “Mom and Dad were talking the other day about how many houses they can fit on the preserve and what the minimum safe distance from Tyler’s temper tantrums would be.”

Stiles smirks as he plops down in Derek’s desk chair and pulls out his laptop. “Not a bad idea. Scott and Allison will want their own place, too. I mean, obviously not for a while, but eventually.”

Derek nods. Since Scott wasn’t born a wolf and Allison isn’t one at all, they’re still in the adjustment period. Made wolves are much more likely to need their space than born wolves. “What about you?” he asks, a little tentatively.

“I dunno. It’s nice to have my own space? But I’d be over here all the time anyway, I mean, I practically live in you guys’ kitchen.” Stiles shrugs a little. He still sleeps a few nights a week at his father’s place, but when he does, Derek almost always stays with him. Of course, up until a month previous, when the new house had been completed, Derek, Stiles, and Cora had all lived at the Stilinski house. Derek thinks that Tom misses having them there, but the sheriff knows that he’s always welcome at the Hale house.

Stiles finishes setting up his laptop and says, “This’ll only take me a few minutes, just gotta check in with some people.”

“Okay.” Derek rolls over and gets a book. He treasures this, this ability for he and Stiles to just be together, that they’re able to spend time with each other but not always need to be talking or doing things. He likes sitting and listening to Stiles’ heartbeat while he does his homework or they’re both just reading.

He does glance over at Stiles’ screen to get a basic idea of what he’s up to, because that will give him a better read on Stiles’ mood for the next few hours. There are two online support groups that
he’s part of. One he actually helps moderate, in fact; it’s a support group that Talia set up for werewolves who were victimized by the WLO. There’s been so much legal bullshit to wade through that it’s been tiring, and Stiles had pointed out that a lot of those who had lost pack members would need support. Derek knows that he’s made several friends there, although he posts under a fake name so nobody will know that he’s the famous Stiles Stilinski who actually brought the WLO down.

The other support group is for victims of traumatic brain injury, and although he also uses a fake name there, it’s as a member, not a moderator. Derek doesn’t interfere with that, beyond having expressed his profound happiness that Stiles joined in the first place and was acknowledging that he needed – and deserved – support.

A quick glance at the screen reveals the blue background of the TBI site. Derek doesn’t look closely enough to see who he’s talking to or what about, although he suspects it’s about his anxiety surrounding the school meeting. He goes back to his book and waits. Stiles types for about twenty minutes, his scent fluctuating between stress and catharsis. Gradually, he settles down, and then he slaps the laptop shut and joins Derek on the bed.

“Where were we?” he asks, grabbing the remote.

“Episode seven,” Derek says, as Stiles starts the DVD up. They’ve been having a Criminal Minds marathon.

“Right,” Stiles says, and he curls into Derek, pressing his face into Derek’s neck and letting out a content little sigh.

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The atmosphere at the Hale house the day of the Searching Ceremonies is so charged that nobody can sit still. Aaron is working on a carpentry project while Jonathan shepherds the kids around and Laura does tai chi. Stiles is in the kitchen chopping vegetables and fruit while Derek sits at the table, peeling eggs. It’s about four PM, and the ceremonies started at two, but one of the changes they had made had been to have smaller groups. It will take Cora time to make her way through all of them.

Those are the only people at the house, at least for the moment. Allison has an archery tournament, and Scott went with her, but nobody blames them. It might be better to keep things to the immediate family, in any case. Talia is at the ceremonies, making sure everything runs smoothly, and Tom is there to help with security. Peter is there somewhere, although nobody has seen him.

Derek jumps as his phone rings, and he sees that it’s Cora. He wipes his hands off hastily and grabs it. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Okay, now, don’t freak out,” Cora says, “but I saw this guy and I kinda like him and oh God I’m hyperventilating how do you even do this?”

Derek finds a grin spreading across his face. “Okay. Have you talked to him yet?”

“Nooooo,” Cora says. “He’s kinda sitting off by himself and he’s got cute curly hair but I don’t know what to say and he’s wearing an orange wrist-band so oh my God what if he turns me down?”

“Look,” Derek says, “just go over and say hi, tell him your name, ask why he’s sitting by himself. Try to chat. And then maybe say something like, you’d like to get to know him better. That indicates your interest but doesn’t try to stake a claim. Ask him if he’d come like to meet your pack. See what happens.”

“Okay. Okay. I can do this.” Cora takes several deep breaths.

“You’re going to be awesome,” Derek tells her.

“Right. Awesome.” Cora says goodbye and hangs up.

Stiles looks over and smiles a little. “Everything okay?”

“I think so.” Derek picks up another egg.

“If this is how tense things were the day you brought me home, I can kind of understand why your mother jumped down our throats.”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees. “It was a long dry spell for her. Laura came home with Jonathan over four years before I picked you, so . . . I think the waiting messed with her head.”
They both look up as the back door opens and Peter strolls in. Both of them give him a somewhat surprised look. “Hey, we thought you’d be down at the school,” Stiles says.

Peter blinks at him. “Why?”

“Uh . . . the searching ceremonies?” Stiles says. “You know, that whole thing where werewolves pick mates and stuff? You did know that’s today, right?”

“Yes,” Peter says, “but I’m not on the market.” He picks up a piece of carrot from underneath Stiles’ fingers. “I’m needed here,” he says, and continues on through the house without another word. Both of them give his retreating back a confused look, then exchange a shrug. Sometimes, there’s just not anything they can do with Peter.

An entire hour passes without any word from Cora, but Derek figures that’s good, that she’s taking it slow with this prospect. Having had his own experiences meeting his mate, he knows that ‘slowing her roll’ is going to be difficult. He imagines that she’ll probably be better at it than he was.

When he hears the low hum of her Prius coming up the drive, he practically falls out of his chair in his efforts to skitter towards the door. Stiles looks over but stays in the kitchen. He knows how intimidating it is to enter a house and suddenly have six different people staring at you, so he’ll hang back until they’re introducing whoever Cora brought home to the pack. Aaron is heading for the door, too, but the others are valiantly refraining.

Derek has just reached the foyer when the door opens and Cora comes in. Her cheeks are pink and she’s wearing a giddy, stupid little smile which makes Derek smile in response. He wonders if he looked like that the day he brought Stiles home – for the first minute, at least.

Behind her is a young man who’s several inches taller, although not quite as tall as Derek, with a crew cut, backwards baseball cap, and jeans that hang too low. His smile is more of a smirk and Derek, God help his soul, takes an immediate dislike to him. He can’t even say why. Everything about the guy sets Derek’s teeth on edge.

But this is Cora’s mate, and after everything she did for him the previous year to help him win Stiles over, he isn’t about to let an iota of that dislike show on his face. So he keeps the smile plastered on, focusing on Cora instead of whatever dudebro she just brought home, and says, “Hey!”

“Hi,” Cora says, even giggling a little. “Uh. Derek, this is Seth. Seth, Derek. And this is my dad.”

“Nice to meet you,” Derek says, trying not to think about the words ‘swag’ and ‘yolo’.

“‘Sup, dude?” Seth says, shaking both their hands. “Seth Freudenberg. Some people like to call me ‘the Freud’.”

Derek’s smile is now one of polite disbelief. Cora just giggles again, leaning into her new mate.

“Why?” Aaron asks blankly.

“Oh, I dunno. I guess they think it makes me sound cool,” Seth says, slinging an arm around Cora’s shoulders. Derek has to repress the instinctive reaction to tell him to get his greasy paws off his little sister. It draws his attention to the green wristband, and his smile fades a little as he realizes that this isn’t who Cora called him about. It seems a little odd, but he probably won’t get a chance to ask what happened until later.
“Come meet the others,” Cora says, smiling brightly and taking Seth by the hand. She pulls him into the kitchen, where Laura and Jonathan are waiting with the kids, and of course Stiles is there. “So, that’s my sister Laura and her husband, Jonathan, and then their kids Tyler and Sylvia. And that’s Stiles, Derek’s mate.”

There’s a general round of greetings, and Seth is giving everyone the dude nod, and Stiles shoots Derek a puzzled look like he just stepped into an alien spaceship and people are speaking in tongues. But he stays polite, and asks, “Are you hungry? I just threw some stuff together since I wasn’t sure what time we would be eating.”

“Man, I’m starved,” Seth says. “I mean, there was some food at the ceremonies but it was all, like, veggie trays and deviled eggs and shit like that.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, looking at the deviled eggs he’s been making for the past forty minutes. “Uh, yeah, there’s some sandwich stuff,” he says. “Just give me a few minutes to finish putting it together.”

“I’ll help,” Derek says.

“No problem,” Seth says. He looks around, still smirking. “So this is how the other side lives, huh? It’s a pretty nice place. But you’re nicer,” he adds, pressing a kiss into Cora’s temple, and she laughs and leans against him. “I couldn’t even believe it when she invited me back here,” Seth continues. “I mean, I was like, no way is a girl like that gonna go for a guy like me. And from the Hale pack, I mean, shit, you guys are famous.”

Derek tries not to bristle, thinking about the way the people had talked about him at the Searching Ceremonies, like he was a prize to be won. He sees the tension in Aaron’s back, too, and Stiles fumbles and drops the tray he’s holding. Derek manages to grab it before it hits the floor.

Things don’t improve much from there. Stiles sets the food out and everyone starts eating, and Cora’s gushing about how Seth caught her eye from across the room and it was like she had been hit by lightning. The others try not to look too incredulous. Talia shows up about twenty minutes later; she had realized Cora had left and rushed home to meet her mate.

Derek sees that Stiles can’t help but get his back up when Talia greets Seth and tells him how happy she is that Cora found someone. The teenager gets suspiciously quiet for a little while, but nobody really notices because Talia’s asking Seth all sorts of questions like how old he is (nineteen), what he’s studying in school (he’s a freshman and he hasn’t declared yet because he’s having too much fun at college) and what his hobbies are (unsurprisingly, he’s a big sports fan, but he also lists three or four television shows that Derek has found totally void of redeeming qualities).

“You should get along great with Stiles, then,” Cora chirps, “because he likes sports, too.”

“Yeah?” Seth asks. “What d’you play?”

“Oh, I, uh, I play, uh,” Stiles says, and Derek can see that he’s lost the word. For some reason, ‘lacrosse’ is a word that falls out of his memory fairly frequently.

“Lacrosse,” Derek intervenes smoothly, before Stiles can employ his usual method of saying ‘that baskets-on-poles game’, which would certainly get the point across, but might embarrass him.

“Oh, lacrosse,” Seth says, in a somewhat dismissive tone. “Give me a good football game any day,” he adds, and then starts to brag about what an awesome football player he is. Stiles shoots
Derek a ‘can you believe this guy’ look, but Derek carefully doesn’t return it because he doesn’t want Cora to see.

They sit and chat for what feels like far too long, and Peter finally makes an appearance, wandering in as if he has no idea that his absence has been noticed. He makes himself a sandwich with the last of the pastrami and sits down next to Talia. Cora greets him and says, “Uncle Peter, this is Seth. I, uhm, I met him at the ceremonies today. Seth, this is my uncle Peter.”

“Yeah, everyone’s heard of him, right?” Seth says.

Several people bristle, but Peter just smiles placidly and says, “I’m infamous.” He sounds quite pleased with himself.

“Does it bother you?” Aaron asks Seth, trying to feel out the situation a little more.

“Nah, man, this is the coolest thing to ever happen to me,” Seth says.

Talia smiles at him and makes a comment about the commitment of joining a pack, and Cora blushes and says, “Mommommm, we agreed we’d take it slow, okay? So nobody make a huge deal out of this. I mean, I only just met him, and it feels . . . right . . . but I just want to be sure.”

“You do what you think is best,” Talia says, smiling at Cora.

Somehow, they survive the evening. After dinner, they play a few rounds of double-deck Uno and then Derek begs off. It’s not quite late enough to go to bed, but he’s tired, and he really wants to get Stiles away from this jerk before he inevitably says something upsetting. Stiles doesn’t argue as Derek pulls him upstairs.

It’s only once the door was shut that Stiles says, “Well, that was interesting,” and heads over to his laptop. He’s been on and off of it all day, keeping an eye on the discussions on the forums. The Searching Ceremonies had been fraught with so much tension that there’s a lot to talk about. Derek is guessing that his mother will be in meetings most of the weekend. Halfway there, Stiles changes his mind and peels off his shirt instead, tossing it in the direction of the hamper. It misses by several feet. “Jesus, I’m wiped out.”

“Yeah,” is all Derek says, because he doesn’t know what else to say. Cora is his sister and he loves her, and he’s well aware that she helped him a lot at a time when no one else could have. He has no idea what she could possibly see in Seth ‘the Freud’ Freudenberg, and he can’t stop the instinctive way his hackles rise every time the guy opens his mouth.

Stiles glances at him sideways and then says, “Okay, I’m just gonna say it. That guy is a complete douchebag.”

Derek smiles despite himself. “I love you,” he says. “And you’re not wrong.”

“I mean, seriously, it’s like he’s trying to be as obnoxious as possible,” Stiles says, dramatically rolling his eyes.

“Maybe he was just nervous,” Derek offers, trying desperately to give Seth the benefit of the doubt.

“Yeah, I guess,” Stiles says.

Derek pats the bed next to him. “And?” he says.

Stiles purses his lips and says abruptly, “I can’t fucking stand watching your mom fawn over him.
I mean, shit, I’m not saying I don’t have issues. And it’s not like I’d be any happier if she were as much of a jerk to him as she had been to me. I just . . .”

“No, I know,” Derek says. He grabs Stiles by the wrist and gently draws him down. “I’d be pretty bristly about it in your shoes.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says, and heaves a gusty sigh. “I could’ve dealt with it better if it was a nice guy – or girl, let’s not be exclusive – but watching her be so nice to that complete jerk really got to me.” He shoves both hands through his hair. “I’ll get used to it, I guess.”

“I think it might take some getting used to for all of us,” Derek says. He puts his hand on Stiles’ back, running his hand over the skin, lingering on the scar on his back. He has two: the neat, round dimple that was the entrance wound on his chest, and then the larger, more ragged wound on his back where the bullet exited. Derek’s thumb rubs over it gently.

“Yes, that’s a much better topic of discussion,” Stiles says, tilting his chin up for a kiss. Derek laughs and obliges. “I really should check the forums,” Stiles murmurs against Derek’s chin, as the older man’s hand traces lower, over the small of his back. His fingers dip down underneath the waistband of Stiles’ pants, and the teenager shivers and decides, “Screw it, everyone can just muddle through without me for one night.”

“Everyone except me,” Derek says, pulling Stiles into his lap.

“Right,” Stiles agrees, as they tilt backwards and land against the bed. “Always.”

Saturday is a lot like Friday. Everyone grits their teeth and tries to be nice. Talia, when she’s there, is full of smiles and welcomes and questions about Seth’s interests and plans. Aaron tries to mediate every time it looks like there might be a scuffle. It gets easier when Scott and Allison are there. Scott is so genuinely good-natured that he takes Seth’s douchebaggery in stride, and the two of them actually manage to have a conversation that doesn’t make Stiles want to spit in anyone’s face. Allison is all rainbows and sweetness and Disney princess smiles; it’s impossible not to like her and Seth doesn’t prove to be an exception to the rule.

The weekend is always busy for Stiles. He uses it to plan his menu for the week and do some of the prep work that he won’t have time to do later. Therefore, he’s able to spend most of the day in the kitchen, chopping vegetables and baking and avoiding Seth without it seeming suspicious. Derek isn’t quite so lucky, but he’s taciturn by nature, so nobody notices when he spends a lot of time playing on his phone and not talking to anyone.

Talia is in and out, and Peter is again suspiciously absent. Derek isn’t sure what to make of this. Although Peter wanders in and out as he pleases, usually without a word to anyone else, he would think his uncle would want to be here for this. If he thought Seth was a threat to the pack, that would only make him more likely to hover and drop subtle threats. He’s learned that the basic rule to Peter’s absences is ‘if he isn’t here, he’s somewhere he thinks is more important’, but he has no idea where that might be.

It’s not until Saturday night that Derek finally manages to get Cora away from Seth long enough to ask her the question he’s curious about. He pulls her aside when Seth has been recruited into dish
duty – he complained about it and Stiles stolidly ignored his complaints, handed him a dirty roaster, and told him to scrub. Cora takes the tablecloth outside to shake it out, and Derek follows her.

“Hey,” he says, and she smiles at him. That smile is almost – almost – enough to make him forgive Seth for being a complete tool. “Can I ask you something that’s none of my business?”

“When don’t you?” she responds, laughing.

“I’m just curious about what happened to the guy you called me about. The one with the orange bracelet.”

“Oh, him.” Cora looks a little chagrined. “I went over and said hi, and we chatted for a minute, but he said he wasn’t interested so I moved on. Then I saw Seth from across the room and it was just like . . . boom. You know?”

“Yeah,” Derek says, because he does know. He’s just still confused. Cora’s voice when she called had been so full of excitement and trepidation. He had never heard her like that before, and he would have sworn that she was looking at The One. Had she latched onto Seth after her real mate refused her? Was there a way he could even ask about that without looking like a jerk?

“Look, I uh . . .” Cora says, twirling her hair between two fingers, “I’m sorry if he’s been . . . if he’s not what you expected. I mean, he doesn’t know all the rules yet, but he’ll learn.”

The uncertain look on her face practically breaks Derek’s heart, especially because he knew that Stiles wasn’t what anyone had expected. He leans over and kisses her on the forehead. “If he makes you happy, that is literally all I care about,” he says, and she beams at him again. “C’mon, let’s go see what Stiles cooked up for dessert.”

When they get into the kitchen, Peter is standing there with Stiles, who looks frustrated. Seth is nowhere to be seen, despite the fact that there are still dishes everywhere. Derek arches his eyebrows and Stiles just gives him an exasperated look but doesn’t say anything. Peter glances over and says, “Remember that and you’ll be fine.” With a nod to Derek, he walks out of the kitchen.

“What was that about?” Derek asks.

“Your uncle being as cryptic as always,” Stiles grumbles. “Hey, I’m going out to lunch with my dad tomorrow. He finally agreed to try that new salad place that I think he’d really like if he could just get over his fear of vegetables. You can manage without me, right?”

“It’ll be hard, but I think I’ll handle it.”

Stiles blinks. “There are so many double entendres, I’m not sure where to start . . .”

Derek cuffs him upside the head. “Nowhere. Don’t start anywhere.”

When dessert is served five minutes later, Peter is back. Seth has returned from wherever he was hiding to avoid dish duty, but he looks a little paler than before. Derek looks between his uncle and the dudebro but decides against asking any questions. That’s always a good option with Peter. Cora looks a little suspicious but clearly doesn’t dare say anything either.

Everyone forgets about it when the pie shows up, and against all odds, the rest of the evening is calm and enjoyable.
Stiles is barely hungry when he gets to Super Salad, the restaurant he’s been challenging his father to enjoy for upwards of two months. Sunday brunch at the Hale house is always an affair. Seth wasn’t there – Cora explained that he’s not a morning person, which is the first thing about him that Stiles doesn’t think makes him a jackass – so everyone was relatively peaceful. Talia was gone, too, at some meeting or other, and Stiles has to admit that he’s glad she wasn’t around. His relationship with her is a lot better, but he can’t help but be bitter about her treatment of him in light of recent events.

He’s glad to see his father, who he really doesn’t see enough of these days, with whom his relationship is blessedly uncomplicated. Tom gives him a back-slapping bear hug and complains fondly about his choice of restaurant. It’s a buffet, so they get their plates and serve themselves before either of them say anything. Stiles tells his father about Seth, and tries to keep it as low-key as possible, which means he only says he really doesn’t like the guy. It’s the understatement of the year.

“Well, I’m sorry to have dragged you away from everything going on at the den,” Tom says. “I’m sure it’s busy there.”

“Yeah, but I’m like, thrilled to be dragged away from it,” Stiles says. “If I had to watch Cora make googly eyes at Seth while he brags about how awesome he is for another minute, I was going to lose my shit. This isn’t going to be easy. But seriously, Dad, you aren’t subtle. I mean, actually going with me to a salad restaurant? When you still try to claim that salad is what food eats? You’re buttering me up. What gives?”

Tom raises his hands in surrender. “I wanted to talk to you about that meeting that Talia and I had with Dr. Kuan that you’re still pretending you don’t know about.”

Stiles looks a little guilty. “Okay, yeah, lay it on me. It’s not about history, right? I’m handling history, Ms. Ricci and I have been experimenting with different learning methods, you know, like reading it or having it read to me, and I keep confusing Sweden and Switzerland but who wouldn’t, and there are too many dukes.”

“It isn’t – “

“Okay, physics, then? I didn’t want to let her take me out of physics, I might have gotten a little snippy with her, I won’t lie, but I didn’t use any bad language – “

“Stiles,” Tom says.

“And it had better not be about bio because I am rocking that class, and later we’re going to do stuff with growing things and Derek’s a gardener so clearly I’m going to kick everyone’s ass.”

“Stiles,” Tom says, firmly enough to draw his attention. “It’s not about your grades. Your grades are fine. She’s more worried about your . . . attitude.”

“Hey, my attitude isn’t a problem.”

“No, it isn’t,” Tom says. “But she says you’ve seemed depressed lately.”

Stiles blinks. “Oh, yeah, no, I can see that. I mean, it’s not like I’ve had a rough year or anything, why would I be depressed?”
Tom gives a little sigh. “I hear some of the accommodations they’re making were bothering you?”

“I hate being pandered to,” Stiles grumbled.

“Stiles, come on,” Tom says. “You know better than that. You’re doing this thing where you blame yourself for not being able to keep up, and you know that’s not right. If you’d gotten shot in the knee and lost your leg, would you blame yourself for not being able to run a marathon?”

“You know, advances in prosthetics – “ Stiles saw the unimpressed look on his father’s face and says, “No, I guess not. Not right away, at least.”

“Then maybe you should keep in mind that you’re still healing, and cut yourself some slack.” Tom poured more dressing on his salad in the hopes of making it edible. “Apparently you’ve been telling people about how you won’t be able to hold down a job?”

“You know, I was thinking about that,” Stiles says, pointing at his father with his fork. “I thought, maybe instead of being a cop, I should be a cook. Or a chef, I guess. I told Derek about it and he said cooks work at McDonalds, so I should be a chef. Or I could open a bakery. That might be fun, right? But then I thought, I cook so much for the pack, maybe I wouldn’t want it to be a day job.”

“Stiles,” Tom says, “you’ve wanted to be a cop since you were three.”

“Yeah, but Dad, I have to have a realistic outlook.”

“Yes, I think a realistic outlook would be a nice thing to bring into this conversation,” Tom says, and his son gives him an annoyed look. “Stiles. Come on. Physically, you’re completely recovered. So you can’t do math and you confuse Sweden and Switzerland. Yes, I’ll grant that you’ve got some memory problems, and that’s why you take notes, just like any other cop would. Why do I feel like this is about more than that?”

Stiles picks at his salad and refuses to look at his father. “C’mon, Dad,” he says. “I tried to solve the case of the Hale house fire and where did it get me? Shot and brain damaged. The entire Hale family could have been killed, Derek nearly died, you nearly died. If Peter hadn’t been indulging in his usual paranoia and following me around, Kate would have killed all of us. Everyone talks about me like I’m sort of hero, but I’m not. Peter’s the hero, not me. He doesn’t mind that I get the credit because, well, he just doesn’t give a shit about that. But seriously, what the fuck did I think I was doing?”

Tom lets out a breath and considers for a minute. Now they’ve gotten to the meat of it, and he’s grateful for that, at least. “You thought you were helping your family, your pack,” he says, “and that’s exactly what you were doing. Did everything go as planned? No. Did Kate Argent maybe outsmart you a little? Sure. But let’s keep in mind that you’re seventeen years old and you were on your first case, whereas she was a woman in her thirties, a professional killer who had been doing it for years.”

For a few moments, Stiles looks thoughtful about this. “I guess you have a point there,” he says.

“I’m not saying that you don’t have a right to be scared,” Tom says. “What happened to you was awful. It was awful for all of us. But don’t be so hard on yourself. None of us are giving up on you, and we’re sure as hell not going to let you give up on yourself.”

“Ugh, Dad,” Stiles says, flushing pink. “Don’t get sappy on me.”

“I would never,” Tom says, spearing a radish with his fork.
Stiles fidgets for a minute. “Sometimes I just worry that I’m being paranoid, though. Like, when Talia was having meetings with some of those other anti-werewolf groups, and I was always like . . .”

“You got a little obsessive about it,” Tom agrees, thinking that this is a somewhat mild way of putting it. Stiles really hadn’t liked those meetings taking place at all, although he acknowledged the need for them – trying to educate the people in hate groups was the best way to get them out of them – and he especially hated Talia going to them. While this had been a good sign of his and Talia’s improving relationship, it had caused some internal strife. It was worse when Talia had suggested some of the other pack members attend. Stiles had put his foot down about it and nobody had quite dared argue with him.

“Yeah. It’s like . . . I spend a lot of time looking for threats, and I don’t know when I’m getting weird about it and when it’s reasonable. Like this guy, Seth. I mean, he’s just your average dudebro, but I can’t help but . . . see shadows and puppet strings.”

Tom takes a moment to consider his response. “Well, I think that’s a pretty natural response,” he starts with.

“Yeah, I know. I asked Uncle P about it, but he’s fucking useless –”

“Language –”

“He just said ‘it’s not paranoia when they’re really out to get you’ and then fucked off somewhere.”

“For God’s sake, Stiles.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Stiles fishes two quarters out of his pockets and sets them on the table. “Swear jar.”

Tom shakes his head and smiles a little despite himself. “Okay. But what Peter has to say aside, I think you do have valid reasons to be concerned about your pack, and a protective instinct that can’t always be pushed aside. I would say that as long as it’s not interfering with your life or causing you undue anguish, a little suspicion isn’t necessarily unhealthy.”

“Okay.” Stiles taps at the table with his fingers and then twirls his fork in one hand. “So, uh, if I asked you to run a background check on Seth Freudenberg . . .”

“I’d tell you that Peter already asked me to do that, and it’s in process, and I’ll have it by the end of the day tomorrow.”

“I’d tell you that Peter already asked me to do that, and it’s in process, and I’ll have it by the end of the day tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Stiles gives a little laugh. “Uncle P, one step ahead of me as usual.”

“He’s the Left Hand of the pack,” Tom says. “It’s his job to view every newcomer as suspicious. Everything is a danger until proven otherwise. He worries about these things and makes these requests so Talia doesn’t have to. So if you’re worried about Seth, talk to Peter.”

“Okay, yeah. Maybe I will. Again.”

“And if you find yourself needing help in school, you’re gonna ask for it, right? We’re not going to have a repeat of last year where things kept getting worse and you just didn’t say anything, right?”

Stiles makes a face at his father, sees the unimpressed look he gets in return, and sighs. “Yes, okay,” he says. “I promise.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Let's stir the pot, shall we? =D

It isn’t that Stiles dislikes school. Actually, he loves the school. Northern California Regional High for Supernatural Youth is a mouthful, and unfortunately doesn’t come with a cute acronym, either. Most of the students affectionately call it ‘Super High’, so that’s what Stiles calls it, too. The teachers are great. Dr. Kuan, the headmaster, takes absolutely zero shit.

Stiles has met vampires, banshees, witches, ogres, and even a troll. Some of them can pass in human society, some don’t. Some don’t want to, but there are classes offered, in case one is interested. ‘Muggle Studies’, Stiles calls it, which had sent several classmates into spates of giggling. But that’s what it is. Classes about how to relate to the human world.

There are humans, too. He isn’t the only one, even after Scott was turned. It’s common for werewolf packs to have humans, particularly packs that have a lot of made wolves, where the children aren’t guaranteed to be born with fangs. Druids are basically human, just with a few extra perks. And some of the classes are perfectly normal, history and math and science. There’s a class that Stiles desperately wants to take his senior year that’s basically ‘witches versus science’, a debate class on whether or not magic can be explained by science. There’s also a comparative religion class that looks absolutely fascinating.

It’s so much more diverse than a regular high school, and he’s immersed himself in it fully. The other students are great. Werewolf or vampire or witch, it doesn’t matter. They treat him like one of their own; nobody pities him or disrespects him for being human. The younger kids look up to him in awe that he tries to ignore. Everyone’s a lot more impressed by him than he thinks he deserves. But he’s made real friends there, good friends, like Erica Reyes and Vernon Boyd, and he has a group he hangs out with now, and there’s always help available when he needs it.

There are good days, great days, where he sits and soaks up information like a sponge and loves it. Days when the denmaking class is all about whether or not free-range farming really matters and where you can buy spices in bulk that still taste good and whether or not it’s worth it to have your own herb garden. Days when he’s writing a paper in his expository writing class about discrimination in the workplace and he never forgets the word ‘prejudice’. Days when his literature teacher has them acting out Shakespeare and he gets to play Benedict and be goofy, just like his old self.

Then there are not-so-good days when things just fall right out of his memory as if it’s a sieve, where he stares at a formula that he knows he just learned but can’t remember what it means, where he struggles to talk about the most basic things. But the other students have learned how to recognize it, and Scott and Cora are both great about knowing when he wants them to help him figure out how to talk again and when he’d rather they both just back off.

The Monday after the Searching Ceremonies is a big deal. There were half a dozen other werewolves besides Cora who were participating, though most of the participants are older than high-school age. Erica still goes even though she’s been dating Boyd for years, just because she likes to meet new people. Cora is the only one who chose, though, so it’s a big deal, and everyone
is asking her questions about it. Stiles’ werewolf culture class has been talking about the ceremonies all week, and the teacher has Cora come up front and talk about what choosing someone felt like. Stiles listens to Cora talk about how her eyes met Seth’s from across the room and it was like she had been struck by lightning, and he kind of wants to throw up in his mouth.

If he’s a little more quiet than usual, nobody notices or pushes him. He keeps his mind on his work and off Seth Freudenberg. He knows from experience now that emotional turmoil will make the cognitive difficulties worse, so it’s worth it to try to stay mellow in school.

Under normal circumstances, he would drive home from school with Cora – he’s been cleared to drive for about a month now – but she’s going over to Seth’s house to meet his parents, so she has her own car. Scott has chores to do at home, so Stiles will be by himself for the majority of the afternoon. Laura is at the Hale house with the kids, but other than that, it’s empty. He gets a roast ready, puts it in the oven, and sits down with his homework.

He’s just pulled out his science textbook when his cell phone rings. He glances over and sees that it’s Talia. “Hey, what’s up?” he greets her.

“Hello, Stiles,” she says warmly. “I was wondering if it would be trouble to have a couple guests for dinner? An old friend of mine is in town.”

Stiles does some mental calculations. There will be plenty of meat – there always is – but he’ll need to run to the grocery for an extra bag of rolls and some additional vegetables. “Sure, if you don’t mind eating a bit late. Any dietary restrictions I should know about?”

“No,” Talia says, “and eating late is fine. I have a meeting and we probably won’t get to the house until six or so. Thank you, Stiles.”

“No problem,” Stiles says, and hangs up. He considers for a few moments, staring at the textbook. If there are going to be guests, dinner might take a while. Getting his homework done now is better than if he’s pressed for time after dinner. Besides, the later it gets, the more tired he is, the more trouble it will give him. He picks up his phone and texts Derek. ‘Your mom is bringing home guests for dinner. Can u stop at the grocery and pick up some things?’

It’s nearly half an hour before Derek checks his phone and says okay, so Stiles asks him to grab the rolls and a head of cauliflower. There’s a wine cellar in the basement, so Talia or Aaron can choose something from there. He can do fruit and chocolate for dessert. It’s quick to prepare and always goes over well. He adds strawberries and raspberries to the list he sent Derek. There are advantages to being able to afford fruit off season.

His phone rings again about ten minutes later, and Talia says, “Ah, you don’t happen to know if Cora and Seth will be there, do you? I called her but she didn’t answer her phone.”

Stiles grimaces a little, but he says, “No, she planned to eat at his place.”

“Okay.” Talia sounds relieved. “All right, then, thank you, Stiles,” she says, and hangs up.

Stiles shakes his head a little and returns his attention to his homework. He fidgets for a few minutes, then can’t stop himself from texting Cora. ‘u ok? Your mom said u didn’t answer your phone’.

Nearly fifteen fretful minutes go by, and he’s considering calling his father, when Cora texts back. ‘sry, we were busy’. He doesn’t ask for details, because he’s fairly sure he knows what they were busy with. “Gross,” he mutters to himself, even though the thought of a guy and a girl making out
typically gives him no distress.

Derek gets home at about quarter ‘til six, a little later than usual because of the grocery trip. He delivers the groceries into Stiles’ hands, gives him a messy kiss, and then goes to take a shower. Aaron gets home about five minutes later and offers to help Stiles chop the fruit, which he’s still working on. He’s one of the few people that Stiles will allow to help in the kitchen without getting possessive and grouchy.

The door opens at six fifteen and Talia comes in with two people behind her. One of them is a man of middling age and height, wearing tinted sunglasses and carrying a cane. The other is an African-American woman with long black hair, wearing a leather jacket. Stiles keeps half an ear out but stays in the kitchen while Talia talks to her husband. “Aaron, this is Duke, you remember . . . and his wife Marin. My husband Aaron . . . Derek, my son . . .”

Stiles keeps working in the kitchen, although dinner is almost ready at this point. The roast is out of the oven and sitting on the counter for its necessary five minutes. The rolls are in two separate baskets. He’s taking the cauliflower out of the pot and depositing it in serving dishes while Allison and Melissa set the table. Tom won’t be there; a nasty hit-and-run on the outskirts of town is keeping him late. He waits patiently until Talia gets into the kitchen with their guests. “And this is Stiles, Derek’s mate and our denmaker. Stiles, this is an old college friend of mine, Deucalion Lymberopolous, and his wife, Marin.”

“Nice to meet you,” Stiles says.

Deucalion extends a hand exactly where a sighted person would, orienting himself by the sound of Stiles’ voice and his heartbeat. “Please, call me Duke. Dinner smells fantastic. I’m a big fan of rosemary.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says, pleased for no particular reason. He always is when someone treats the denmaking position as important. “Everything will be ready in just a few minutes,” he adds.

“I’ll help you carry things out,” Derek says.

A few minutes later, everyone is seated around the table. Cora is absent, but everyone else is there, even Peter, who seems grumpy to have been displaced by the guests. It’s pack etiquette, of course. Deucalion is an alpha, equal in status to Talia, so he sits at her right hand, which puts Aaron on Talia’s left, in Peter’s normal seat. Marin is next to Deucalion, and Peter is next to Aaron.

Or at least that’s how it would be, except as they’re getting seated, Deucalion says, “Stiles, would you come sit by me?”

Stiles glances askance at Talia, who gives a little nod. So he winds up at Talia’s left hand, which is a somewhat uncomfortable place to be if not wholly inappropriate.

“I’ve been anxious to meet you,” Deucalion says, as everyone starts passing dishes around the table. “I’ve heard a lot about you, you see. Not from Talia, but on the news.”

“Oh,” Stiles says. So it’s going to be unwanted celebrity time. “Well, you can’t believe everything you read.”

Deucalion chuckles a little. “Of course not. But your celebrity is directly related to mine, in a way.” He takes his glasses off and folds them, tucking them into a pocket. His eyes are pale gray and cloudy. It’s a somewhat discomfiting sight. “Seven years ago, you see, I was driving along an old country road when my engine started giving me trouble. I pulled over, lifted the hood, and it
exploded in my face.

“A terrible accident, the local police said. I tried to explain that there must have been explosives rigged with silver or some such,” Deucalion gestures to his face, “or else my eyes would have wholly healed and my vision would have returned. Unfortunately, they didn’t listen.” He picks up a roll and begins to butter it. “It wasn’t until you exposed the WLO for what they were that I was able to get the case reopened and prove that it had been no accident.”

“Oh,” Stiles says again. He’s really not sure how to respond to that. What would be appropriate? Condolences? Congratulations? “I, uh, I’m sorry.”

Deucalion gestures with the butter knife and says, “I lost my pack afterwards. They didn’t believe I could still be an effective alpha if I were blind. And I lost my mate, in the explosion.”

“But you remarried?” Stiles asks, startled enough to blurt it out. He was under the impression that that never happened. That if a wolf lost their mate, that was it. Certainly his experiences with Peter had led him to believe that.

“A marriage of convenience,” Deucalion says, and smiles at Marin, where she’s sitting down the table. “Marin is a dear friend, and taking her as my mate brought me into an alliance with a group of Druids, which helped me hold onto my territory in the aftermath of the attack. We’ve been building the pack back up since then.”

“That’s really interesting,” Stiles says, unable to hide his enthusiasm. “But uh... if you don’t mind me asking, did it really matter to have it proved, that it wasn’t an accident? I mean, the WLO was arrested already.” It was a question he had had for a while, but had never quite dared ask in the forums.

“Well, closure, for one thing,” Deucalion says. “The confirmation that I’m not insane or paranoid.” He tilts his head towards Peter, further down the table. “As I’m sure some here could sympathize with.”

Talia grimaces a little, but doesn’t say anything. Stiles had never heard how that discussion had gone for her and Peter, but he knows that Talia still harbors guilt about the way she had treated her brother over the issue of the fire.

“There are monetary issues for some, of course,” Deucalion says, “although personally that didn’t affect me.”

Stiles nods in understanding. The WLO’s money had been mostly hidden in offshore accounts and laundered in a variety of exciting ways, but through various means both legal and illegal, Talia’s law firm had been able to track most of it down. It turned out that the WLO was obscenely rich, and it had opened them up to a number of civil lawsuits from people who had been injured or the families of those who had been killed. Stiles knows that the WLO had been court-ordered to pay all of his and Derek’s hospital bills, as well as the bills for all the therapy, both physical and cognitive, that he had received. They had also been ordered to pay the Hale family a hefty sum for the loss of not only their second house, but their first. Given that the Hales were financially sound themselves, Talia had used that money to set up a charity foundation for other werewolves who had been victimized, but were unable to get money out the WLO for a variety of reasons, usually a lack of proof.

“And knowing that I’m not paranoid, I certainly rest easier knowing that the people who orchestrated the attack are behind bars,” Deucalion continues. “Or some of them, at least.”
Stiles blinks, and he sees a fleeting expression of annoyance on Talia’s face. “What?” he asks.

Talia sighs. “Gerard Argent’s sentencing is next week, and it looks like he probably isn’t going to get any time. He was able to convince almost everyone that he had no knowledge of what Kate was doing, so other than some financial fraud charges . . .”

“Oh,” Stiles says. He’s not sure what to think, because frankly he doesn’t know how involved Gerard was. Kate was certainly the mastermind behind most of the murders that he was able to uncover, but it was impossible to say how much Gerard had been involved in the larger schemes that the WLO had been perpetrating to sow dissension between humans and werewolves.

“He has terminal cancer, you see,” Deucalion says, “and the judge seems inclined to show him some clemency, given the givens.”

“Well, at least we know he’ll be dead soon,” Stiles says, feeling uncharitable. Further down the table, he hears Peter give a snort of laughter.

They eat for a while and talk about noncontroversial topics, and Stiles finds out that Deucalion is originally from England but has lived in both South Africa and Australia, and emigrated to America only about a decade previous. His pack is from the deserts in Southern California, but he says he likes the climate in the north better. He did a year abroad at Columbia while he was in college, which is how he knows Talia.

Once dinner is finished, Deucalion folds his hands in front of himself and says, “So, Stiles, I have a business proposition you might be interested in. I’m actually a writer, and I’ve been considering writing a book on the events of the past year.”

“Wow, nope,” Stiles says, without even a thought as to how impolite that response was. “Nope, nope, a world of nope.”

Deucalion looks slightly discomfited, but Talia laughs. “I did try to tell you,” she says.

“You did,” Deucalion agrees, smiling slightly. “All right, Stiles. Talia did say that she doubted very much you would be interested in letting me write about you. However, would you consent to being a single subject in a broader work? I’m compiling the stories of different packs and families who were targeted by the WLO. You would be one among many. Would that make it easier?”

“I’ll think about it,” Stiles says. The concept still doesn’t thrill him. He’s had enough of interviews and prying questions.

“Well, while you’re thinking about that, think about this,” Deucalion says, “there are still cases where the WLO is suspected but no proof has been obtained. Would you be interested in some research work, to help me dig them up?”

That sounds more like something that’s up Stiles’ alley. “That could be cool,” he says. “I mean, if we had a place to start and I wasn’t just fishing in the dark.”

“Are you sure you want to take that onto your plate?” Talia asks, looking at him closely. “I know that you’re busy with school.”

“Well, yeah, but . . .” Stiles isn’t sure how to mention that having a project that he’s actually interested in will probably help him keep his shit together during school, in the long run. “Let me try it and if my school stuff starts to fall behind, I can always come back to it later.”

“There’s no rush,” Deucalion assures him. “I’ve got several cases that I’ve only outlined and two
that I’m in the process of writing, so I won’t need new information for a while. I’ll be traveling a lot, but you can always reach me by email.”

“Okay, cool,” Stiles says. “I’d like that a lot.”

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Saturday night is date night for the Hale pack, and although sometimes Derek and Stiles take off to do something, more typically they get stuck watching Laura’s kids. Cora is responsible enough, but watching two children under the age of five, one of whom is a werewolf, can be exhausting. She usually appreciates the help. Theoretically, baby-sitting duty gets rotated among the various couples, but being the youngest, Derek and Stiles often draw the short straw. So while Talia and Aaron are off at a play, and Laura and Jonathan have a romantic evening planned at a restaurant with live music, Derek and Stiles settle into the house for the evening. Stiles has made macaroni and cheese for the kids, and the rest of them are just having sandwiches.

The doorbell rings just as they’re finishing up, and Cora squeals. “That’ll be Seth!” she says, hopping out of her chair and heading for the front door. Once she’s out of the room and Derek is sure she can’t see, he rolls his eyes, hard. It’s about the only way he can express his feelings without upsetting his sister.

Stiles bites his lip to keep from snickering and gets up from the table, taking Tyler’s empty plate and getting him the half of an apple he had chopped up for the toddler earlier. Cora comes in with Seth behind her, dressed in a T-shirt and shorts despite the low temperatures. “Hey,” Stiles says, trying to be friendly.

“‘Sup?” Seth asks.

Derek shrugs a little, as socially inept as always. “Babysitting duty,” he says, trying to keep his eyebrow from twitching at Seth’s outfit.

“Lucky us,” Seth says. “Hey, I’m starved. Mind if I . . .?”

“Help yourself,” Stiles says, gesturing to the sandwich material that’s still sitting out. Seth went over and picked up the last of the pastrami. “Oh, not that. Sorry. I’m saving it for Peter.”

“Hey, you snooze, you lose,” Seth says, reaching for the rye bread.

Derek’s eyebrows shoot up. He almost snaps at Seth, but manages at the last moment to come back to a reasonable tone. “That’s not exactly the right answer there.”

“Cora told me you never even know when he’ll show up, anyway,” Seth says, slathering mustard onto one of the pieces of bread. “Besides, the dude can buy more pastrami. It’s not like you don’t have enough money.”

Stiles snatches the bag of pastrami away from him. “It’s for Uncle Peter,” he says. “It isn’t for you. There’s ham and roast beef if you want to eat.”

“Whoa,” Seth says, lifting his hands in mock surrender. “Whatever you say, little man.”

Derek grit his teeth and takes a moment to think about how to point out how out of line Seth is
without turning it into an actual reprimand or confrontation. He looks at his sister and says, “You didn’t tell me that he missed the packet on basic pack etiquette.” Somehow, he makes the words sound friendly, although he’s pretty sure Cora knows the comment isn’t directed at her. “I think we may still have one left around somewhere.”

Cora’s face is creased in a little grimace. She walks up beside Seth and wraps a hand around his forearm. “Stiles is our denmaker, Seth,” she says. “That means that the kitchen is his territory. Sometimes he saves things for people or because he’s going to need them for something later, so just . . . if he tells you not to eat something, don’t argue with him about it.”

“Okay, babe,” Seth says, picking up the bag of ham.

Stiles’ smile is brittle, frozen onto his face. He starts cleaning up the rest of the meal without another word. Derek nods to acknowledge Cora’s effort, though he still wants Seth out of the kitchen and away from Stiles because his attitude is the worst. Instead of saying anything, he gets up and gets a washcloth to clean up Sylvia’s face and hands.

Tyler starts waving his hands at Derek. “I’m done, I’m done, can I be excused, I wanna go play with my trains.”

Derek glances over at Stiles, clearly checking with him even though he knows Stiles won’t care. Stiles gives a little nod, so Derek says, “Yeah, go ahead,” and Tyler shoots out of his chair like a rocket.

“I’m going to stay in here and . . . bake something,” Stiles says, and glances over at Derek. “If you’ll be okay without me?”

Derek nods while wiping Sylvia’s face. Mostly he seems to be wiping her tongue, as she’s determined to lick the cloth. Afterwards, he lifts her out of her chair and balances her on one hip. “Yeah, just say something if you want help.” Or want company, Derek thinks, but he can tell that mostly Stiles just doesn’t want to spend the evening with Seth. He can hardly blame him.

“Ooooh, hey, will you make those lemon bars?” Cora asks.

Stiles looks up at her and smiles, a genuine smile that shows how much he still cares about her, despite her taste in men, and goes into the refrigerator to get the lemons. “Sure.”

“Stiles is an amazing baker,” Cora tells Seth.

“Well, we all gotta have our talents,” Seth says, his mouth full.

Stiles sets a cutting board down on the counter a little harder than necessary.

“Let’s go watch a movie,” Cora says hastily.

Derek sidles up to Stiles and whispers, “I somehow doubt he has any.”

Stiles gives a little snort of laughter that he quickly stifles. Seth doesn’t notice; he’s already on his way into the living room, with Cora dragging him by one hand. Derek shakes his head a little and follows. By the time he gets in there and sets Sylvia down to play, Seth is looking through their DVDs. Tyler sees him doing so and immediately shouts, “Thomas!”

Derek looks at Cora. “Think we can all stand one episode?” he asks. They’re all very, very sick of Thomas the Tank Engine, but watching one episode usually gives Tyler the cuddly sofa time he needs.
“Sure,” she says, although it comes with a dramatic eye roll.

“Two!” Tyler says.

“One,” Cora replies.

“Two!”

“One, and a lemon bar before bed!” Stiles shouts in from the kitchen.

“Okay, one!” Tyler says, diving onto the sofa.

“You’re the best!” Derek calls out to Stiles, sitting on one end of the sofa and curling an arm around Tyler. The toddler happily wriggles into Derek’s lap. Cora smiles and puts on the DVD, scooping Sylvia up to hold her while it plays, then pats the sofa next to her.

Seth sinks down onto it and says, “Geez, I thought we were going to watch a movie.”

Derek shrugs. “We will once Thomas is over. But they don’t care about movies unless you want to watch something animated.” He doesn’t dare say ‘Disney’, lest he touch off a miniature riot.

“Or that N-A-T-U-R-E video with the F-I-S-H,” Cora says, laughing, as Tyler has recently become enthralled by such a thing and will watch it for hours on repeat.

“Okay, well, don’t blame me if I get a little distracted,” Seth says as the Thomas video starts, burying his face in Cora’s neck and giving it loud, wet kisses. Cora giggles. Derek rolls his eyes but decides he doesn’t care that much because the kids see physical affection all the time. Everyone knows to keep things G-rated.

Sylvia starts crying to be let down about five minutes later, and Cora puts her on the floor but keeps an eye on her as she starts to crawl around. She wanders over to the box of toys and picks up a rubber dog bone, sticking it into her mouth and chewing it on it happily. Seth sees this and bursts into laughter. “Is she chewing on a dog toy?”

Derek tries not to be offended. He tells himself that he wouldn’t be annoyed if the comment were coming out of someone else’s mouth, other than Seth. He supposes from the standpoint of a human with little exposure to werewolves, it is a bit funny to see a toddler nomming on something designed for a canine mouth. “She doesn’t understand the difference between her teething toys and Tyler’s old ones,” Derek says evenly. “We eventually gave up.”

“Oh, I get it,” Seth says, still chortling. “The dog toys are for the other kid. Okay.”

Derek gives him a flat look. “Our teeth are sharp and Tyler needs something that will stand up to that. All toddlers like chewing on things when their teeth come in. Even you did, I’m sure.”

Seth ignores the dig. “So the girl isn’t a werewolf?”

“No,” Cora says, a little hastily. “See, if two born wolves have a child together, it’ll always be a werewolf. Like me and all my siblings were all wolves. But if a born wolf and a human have a child, there’s only a fifty-fifty chance it would be a werewolf, and if a born wolf and a made wolf have a child, there’s about a two-thirds chance. So, Jonathan wasn’t born a werewolf, and their first baby, Tyler, he’s a werewolf, but Sylvia isn’t.”

“Hunh,” Seth says. “Why don’t they just bite her and make her into one?”
“Why would anyone want to do that?” Derek asks. “There’s nothing wrong with Sylvia being human. When she’s older, she can ask to be turned if she wants, but nobody’s going to force her or make that choice for her.”

“Oh, I guess,” Seth says, as if what Derek just said hasn’t sunk in at all.

Derek gives another roll of his eyes and leans against Cora. She shifts, seeming uncomfortable, but doesn’t say anything.

“She just looks so, I don’t know, I mean, she’s got a bone in her mouth,” Seth says a few moments later.

“It’s just a toy, Seth.” Derek wishes he knew how to make this better for Cora, but even tolerance doesn’t seem to be helping. “What does it matter if it’s shaped like a bone or a ring?”

“I dunno, she just looks stupid,” Seth says.

“Hey!” Tyler jerked out of Derek’s arms and threw himself onto Seth, pummeling at him with tiny fists. “Don’t call my sister stupid!”

Derek stands and plucks Tyler off Seth easily, cradling him in an embrace. “Hey, hey, you know better than to hit. Even when people say mean things about you or your sister.” The last part is clearly directed at Seth, only with a highly unamused look that clearly conveys he thinks the toddler is being the mature one.

Sylvia, upset by all the commotion, starts to cry. Seth rolls his eyes and mutters, “Great, now she’s crying.” He obviously thinks that they won’t hear him, forgetting that he’s now dealing with werewolf ears.

“Yes. Because you upset her brother,” Derek says, keeping his voice even so he doesn’t upset them anymore. He looks at Cora, who’s practically frozen on the sofa, and decides that the entire thing needs to stop. They all need a break. He can’t keep arguing with Seth. So he sets Tyler down and scoops Sylvia up, then extends a hand to Tyler. “Let’s go see Uncle Stiles.”

“Okay,” Tyler says, and he goes with him, but turns to give Seth the stink-eye before they round the corner.

“We’re going to go for a walk,” Cora says hastily, tugging Seth to her feet.

Stiles has heard them coming and is waiting with a treat for each of the kids, to distract them. Sylvia stops crying as soon as she gets the beater to lick off, and begins gleefully making a mess everywhere. Stiles hands the other beater to Tyler, and then a rolling pin to Derek.

“Thanks . . .” Derek says, hearing the front door open and close.

“For him,” Stiles says, jerking his head towards the living room.

Derek looks from the pin to the doorway to the living room like he’s actually considering it. “He’s upsetting Cora. How can he not care about that?”

“I upset you quite a bit when we first met,” Stiles says, his tone a little flippant. He gives the children a significant look and shakes his head. The message is clear: ‘not in front of the kids’. Derek leans against the counter, sighs, and hands the rolling pin back. The two children are immensely cheered up by the beaters, and Stiles sends them back to play.
“So remember when I asked you what happens if someone chooses a mate that other pack members really can’t stand?” Stiles asks, pouring the lemon filling into a pan.

“Yes. Yes, I do.” Derek rubs a hand over his face. “And I’d be doing better if he was trying to be civil in return, but he’s not. And I know you upset me, and I upset you, and it was awkward for a huge variety of reasons, half of which had to do with an actual conspiracy, and you hadn’t meant to be chosen so . . . that sort of meant I had to take my lumps. This isn’t the same.”

Stiles glanced through the doorway to check on the kids before putting the lemon bars in the oven. “Peter had my dad run a background check on him.”

“So it isn’t just me?” Derek sounds relieved. “I’m not being unreasonable or expecting too much?”

With a little shrug, Stiles says, “I’m not the person to ask about paranoia. I’ve had my share of issues. But it came back completely clean. He’s exactly who he says he is, no ties to any other organizations, just a college kid who wandered into the ceremonies and came up lucky.”

Derek hesitates for a moment. “Do you believe it?”

“I don’t have any reason not to believe it,” Stiles says. “Yeah, it bothers me, sure. But maybe that’s just because he bothers me.”

There’s a pause while Derek takes Stiles’ opinion into account. “What does Uncle Peter think? Besides the obvious, that we all want to follow Tyler’s example?”

“He’s been suspiciously quiet on the issue,” Stiles says, and looks at the chair in which Peter normally sits, “and suspiciously absent when I look for him to ask about it.”

“He’s so weird,” Derek says, with obvious affection in his tone.

Stiles shakes his head. “No, this is more than Uncle P weirdness. It’s like he’s avoiding me. No.” Stiles chews on his lower lip. “It’s more like he’s giving me space. Allowing me to come to my own conclusions without being tainted by his opinions.”

Derek ponders that for a few moments. “That does sound like something Uncle Peter would do.” He looks at the rolling pin with longing. “But my opinion is that I can’t stand the guy. Because he doesn’t care about making Cora happy, doesn’t care that he’s actively making her unhappy. If it was just a personality clash, we could swallow it if he made her life better. But he isn’t.”

“Yeah. I mean . . . even though Talia obviously had her issues, I still got along with the rest of the pack. You know, once I got over myself and actually showed my face here.”

“Exactly.” Derek slumps a little. “And he ignores most of the basic customs, so how did he even get past all the stops and checks to get into the ceremonies?”

Stiles gives a somewhat dry smile and says, “I’ve learned in the past few months that it’s very easy to learn something and then forget all about it.”

The expression Derek returns is just as dry. “Well a) you’re smart enough to write things down, and b) you aren’t an asshole.” He shrugs a little as Stiles turns to rinse out the mixing bowl he was using. “But him being a jerk isn’t the only thing that’s bothering me. When Cora called me from the ceremonies for – well, moral support, really – she talked about someone else. She said he had an orange bracelet and curly hair. And she sounded . . . excited. But then she brought this guy home instead.”
“Did you ask her about it?”

“Yeah. She just said orange-bracelet-curly-hair wasn’t interested, and then she saw Seth, and that was it.”

Stiles is frowning a little as he starts to load the dishwasher. “That’s weird.”

Derek moves to help him. “Yeah, I mean, given how excited she was about the first guy, this one shouldn’t be such a sure thing. Interesting and worth pursuing, maybe, if he wasn’t such a jerk, but not a sure thing so soon.”

“It’s not . . . the same for everyone, right?” Stiles says. “I mean, not everyone has the whole struck-by-lightning feel the way you did when you saw me.”

“Right,” Derek says, putting a stack of plates away. “And that’s what makes this weird. She went from showing strong interest in one person to being hit in the head with it by another. If Seth really is the one perfect person for her, she would never have cared about the first guy.”

Stiles files all this away. “So it’s weird, we all agree on that. Look, I know that it’s super awkward for any of you guys to talk to Cora because of what happened with me. I mean, your mom especially, if she says anything about what a jerk this guy is, Cora will be down her throat.”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees glumly. “I just . . . I wish I could fix this. I would have blown it with you so many times if it hadn’t been for Cora.”

“I know,” Stiles says, smirking at him. Derek swats at him with a handy dishtowel. “Not that I know what we could possibly say. Are we allowed to ask if she’s really sure about this, or is that tacky?”

“He’s done so many tacky things just in the last hour that I think you’re allowed one or two,” Derek says. “Maybe we could ask what made her so sure?”

“And hear about how she just felt it again? I think I’d throw up in my mouth.”

“Hard to argue with that,” Derek agrees. “But she should be able to tell you something specific that struck her. I mean, I very distinctly remember the way you gave no fu . . . the way you didn’t care about social conventions,” he amended hastily, since Tyler was well within earshot and they had probably taught him enough bad words for one night.

“Oh, that’s what you noticed?” Stiles asks with a somewhat wicked grin, lifting both hands and wiggling his fingers, damp from the dishes, in Derek’s general direction.

“It’s one of the things,” Derek says, but he laughs and grabs at Stiles’ hands.

Stiles allows himself to be caught, and beams, a silly expression, when Derek kisses his palm. “Well, whatever it is, we’ll work it out somehow. We’ve got a pretty good track record for working shit out.”

“True,” Derek says, and kisses each one of Stiles’ fingers, just because he can.

“And later,” Stiles says, looking at Derek through his lashes in that way that seems specifically designed to drive Derek crazy, “once Laura and Jonathan are home, we can go reward each other for how maturely we’ve handled all this.”

“Sounds good to me.”
Stiles gets the first batch of files from Deucalion the day before he has a science test, and reluctantly puts them away until the next day. He had offered to help, but Talia was right; it would be too easy for him to get distracted from his schoolwork. He won’t have time on the weekends, either. There’s always too much pack stuff to do then.

School days at least have the same pattern. He goes back to the Hale house after school, does his homework first thing before he gets tired, and then starts dinner. Wednesday nights are leftover night, and Friday nights are take-out nights, so he only has to cook three nights during the week. Then he has a few spare hours to do whatever he wants, and he usually spends it reading or watching television with Derek or the pack.

So instead of reading, he can use that free time to work on the case files. But he doesn’t want to spread them out all over the Hale house. It seems tacky, given how many pack members were killed in the fire. And Derek’s room – their room, he has to correct himself every time – is a special place to him. He doesn’t want to tarnish it with this stuff.

But Derek won’t mind spending a few nights a week at the Stilinski house, and Stiles knows that his dad will be thrilled. He’s over for dinner at least a few nights a week, but like Melissa and Allison, never stays the night.

This decided, Stiles studies an extra hour for biology and steels himself for the fact that he’s going to have to ask his teacher if he can keep written descriptions of mitosis and meiosis – he just can’t remember which one is which – with him during the test. Then he reads the three chapters of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* that he needs done for school the next day and updates his crib sheet on the different characters that helps him keep it straight.

Once all that is done, he gets dinner on the table. Seth is being slightly less obnoxious than usual, and Scott has been doing his part to keep him engaged so nobody else has to deal with him. Scott’s general good-natured attitude puts a bubble-like shield around him. Seth’s behavior just bounces off. And to be fair, they do have some things in common – they like several of the same sports teams, and share an interest in motorcycles. Scott has been saving up for a dirt bike, and Seth is glad to tell him all about his motorcycle-riding adventures. Scott has bravely taken on his role as ‘douche handler’, and Stiles professes his love for his brother several times a day by text.

The only other person who engages with Seth – besides Cora, of course – is Talia. Her behavior sets Stiles’ teeth on edge the entire time. She’s friendly with him, letting all his inappropriate comments roll off her back in a way she doesn’t do with any other pack member. She even flatters him sometimes, although she’s always subtle about it and usually relates it back to how lucky Cora is to have found her mate.
Stiles finds her behavior baffling. He knows Talia well enough at this point to be one hundred percent positive that she doesn’t like Seth any better than the rest of them do. He also knows that she’s not very good at tolerating things she doesn’t approve of. She had rejected Stiles for no reason other than his gender, yet she’s fawning all over the poisonous little prick that Cora has chosen. Stiles doesn’t get it, and he doesn’t want it, and he tries to stay as far away from both of them as possible.

“You wanna go back to my place tonight?” Stiles asks, as they’re clearing the table. “I’ve got some stuff I want to work on.”

“Is that what you’re calling it?” Seth asks, smirking at them across the table.

Stiles rolls his eyes slightly and says, “Yeah, you know, the time at which I was embarrassed about sex is long past. I,” he says dramatically, pointing at Derek, “am having sex with him. A lot. And it’s awesome. And since everyone here knows it, I’ll just go on not being ashamed of it.” He turns to Derek and says, “I have some stuff to work on, those case files Deucalion sent me. And afterwards I plan on bending you over and fucking you stupid.”

“Oh, come on,” Scott says, laughing. “There are limits to how much we want to know, dude!”

Derek is biting his lip, trying not to laugh. “I think I would be okay with that agenda.”

“Just okay?” Stiles asks innocently. “Is there a position you’d prefer?”

“Yeah, I didn’t picture him as the woman,” Seth says.

Stiles’ smile goes tight and brittle again, and several of the pack bristle. Then he turns to Seth and says, “That would make sense, being in that he’s not one, and if you ever say anything like that again, I will describe his dick to you in excruciating detail.”

Seth holds up his hands in that position of mock surrender which annoys Stiles so much, but he doesn’t argue. Stiles packs up some of the leftovers for his father while Derek helps with the clean up, and then they head back to the Stilinski house. It’s dark and mostly empty. Sheriff Stilinski usually works late on evenings that Stiles won’t be home. Cleopatra, the stray cat he had adopted the previous year, winds around Stiles’ ankles as they let themselves in. Stiles feeds her, since his father hasn’t been home to do it yet, and heads upstairs.

“So why didn’t you want to do this at the house?” Derek asks, settling himself on Stiles’ bed as he sits down with his laptop.

“I just don’t want to call up bad memories for anybody,” Stiles says. “You don’t even have to stay, if you don’t want. You could go watch a movie downstairs or something.”

“I’d rather be near you,” Derek says, and Stiles looks over his shoulder and smiles at him. “I’ll just read. Don’t worry about me.”

“Okey dokey.” Stiles takes out the box that Deucalion had delivered him. E-mail wasn’t necessarily secure, he had explained, and although it could be made so, Stiles wasn’t personally equipped with a secure e-mail account. So he had printed everything and delivered it to the Hale house. That’s okay, because Stiles prefers having it on paper, so he can spread it out and see it better.

He finds four fat manila folders inside the box and takes each one of them out. Two are basic murders, or at least as basic as a murder gets when the victim is a werewolf. One is a disappearance, and the last is a car accident in which two werewolves were injured and their child,
a human, was killed. That one makes Stiles’ stomach churn, and he starts pinning it up. Almost immediately, he sees some similarities between it and some of the other investigations he had made, before he had exposed the WLO.

He works in silence for a while, except for the music on the stereo and Cleopatra’s purring from where she’s settled next to Derek on the bed. Deucalion has gotten him all the relevant information, including that which the police had had. Stiles is a halfway decent mechanic – he tunes up the Jeep himself – so he knows what to look for. A leak in the brake fluid line. There isn’t one there. Instead what there is, is a part that doesn’t belong.

Derek glances up as Stiles sits down at his laptop and types a quick e-mail to Deucalion. ‘Case 51935. Brake fluid line damaged. Replaced after the fact so nobody noticed. Evidence tampering either at the scene or at the station. More likely at the station; looks as though one of the wolves was an alpha and the accident could not have kept him down long. He would have noticed if anyone approached the car for reasons other than to help, although if there was a big crowd it still could have been done. Possibly corrupt police? Check financials for WLO ties.’

He signs the e-mail and starts putting the case away. “That was quick,” Derek remarks.

“That one was easy,” Stiles says, “and I have a suspicion that I didn’t tell Duke anything he didn’t already know. He might be throwing me some soft ones to see if I’m still up to snuff.”

Derek nods a little but doesn’t say anything about it. Stiles decides to leave the disappearance for last, as it’ll probably be the hardest. He takes out the files for the first murder. A traveling omega – heading, in fact, for the Searching Ceremonies – who had been attacked outside a bar. Omegas were weaker than most wolves, so it didn’t take much more to kill them than a human. Successive blunt head trauma had done this one in.

‘Multiple assailants’, Stiles writes down, but then changes his mind. The area outside the bar was well-traveled. Someone would have noticed, or he would have called for help. He checks the pictures of the body again and looks for the burn marks. Different tasers make different kinds of marks, and he doesn’t recognize these. He takes a picture and sends it to his father to see if he knows.

Witness statements were useless. Nobody had seen or heard anything. The victim’s pockets had been cleaned out, so police had finally decided it was a robbery by some thug and moved on. They either hadn’t noticed the burn marks or hadn’t cared. There was security camera footage available, but Stiles didn’t have it. Just a few photos that showed him entering the bar and then leaving it.

He’s about to put the entire case aside when he sees someone vaguely familiar as he shuffles through the photos. He goes back to his laptop and starts scrolling through all the different people in the WLO. He has dossiers on all of them that he never bothered to delete.

Ten minutes later, he’s typing up another e-mail to Deucalion. ‘Case 69127. See surveillance photo 56, left back corner, tall guy, white V-neck. Name is Kody Strong. WLO member since ‘89. Used a taser (burn marks on right shoulder/neck area). Check his financials, probably can prove he was in the area at the time of the attack. Not conclusive but with more surveillance footage can probably prove that he left the bar at the same time.’

With that, Stiles yawns and stretches. “Thirsty?” he asks Derek, who glances up and nods. “I’m gonna make some cocoa. Be right back.”

Cocoa and murders don’t exactly go together, but hey, he’s doing what he can with what he’s got. He’s been at it for about an hour, and he thinks that maybe he’ll take a break. Better to have as
much sex with Derek as he can before his father gets home. He’s not exactly Puritanical about it, but the Stilinski house doesn’t have soundproofed bedrooms the way the Hale house does, and, well. Stiles can be kind of loud.

“You know what I was thinking,” he says, as he packs up the second case, and Derek arches one perfect eyebrow at him. “We should have sex in my bed.”

Derek blinks at him. “Uhm, okay?” he says.

Stiles blinks back, then a faint frown crosses his face. “No, not my bed. Why did I say bed?” He shakes his head a little. “Uh . . . fuck it. This thing.” He pats his desk chair.

“Oh, your chair,” Derek says.

“Yeah, that’s it, chair,” Stiles says. “It has wheels. We can roll around in it.”

“It’s all fun and games until somebody tips over,” Derek says. He’s amused but watching Stiles’ closely. Often – too often, really – this sort of thing will upset Stiles, distract him from whatever else is going on. He sympathizes, even though he knows he doesn’t fully understand the struggles that Stiles goes through. He just hopes it won’t ruin their evening.

But it doesn’t. Whether because Stiles is riding high on the cases he just solved, the proof that he can still put puzzles together, or just because of the idea of desk-chair-sex is too appealing to be denied, he doesn’t lose stride. “We could back it up against the wall,” he suggests.

Derek looks at the chair, looks at Stiles and his wide, earnest eyes, the way his fingers are lightly grasping the back of said chair. “Okay,” he says, “but maybe we should start with ‘simultaneous handjobs in the chair’ and if nobody gets hurt we can try actual sex in the chair some other day.”

Stiles laughs a little and says, “I’d say something about living dangerously, but actually I’m pretty happy to not be living dangerously, so. Handjobs in the chair it is.”

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It’s late before Stiles and Derek finally get to bed that night, which he regrets heartily when his alarm goes off at six fifteen the next day. He drags himself out of bed, groaning. Derek just rolls over and doesn’t really wake. Stiles resets the alarm for eight for him, gets dressed, and leaves for school. He goes in a little early so he can talk to his biology teacher about a few crib notes he’d like to have available on the test. She looks them over briefly and says that they’re fine.

He still feels awkward about it, taking out the notes when everyone else doesn’t have any. But screw this, he solved two mysteries. He might forget a word or two occasionally, but he’s still got it where it counts. Even having to refer to Switzerland as ‘that country that invented pocket knives’ in his history class doesn’t get him down.

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After school, he and Scott are comparing notes on the biology test while both of them do their homework. It’s Wednesday, leftover night, so he’s thinking about doing some baking. He tries to do that on the nights that he doesn’t have to cook as much. It’s nice to have some cookies or brownies to nibble on during the later part of the week.

Cora is a little quieter than usual, and when pressed, says that she and Seth argued because he
wanted her to spend the night at his place and she was still a little reluctant. “I haven’t slept somewhere that my pack isn’t in . . . ever,” she says, and Stiles is pretty sure that the real answer is ‘since before the fire’. Cora is so bright and cheerful that sometimes he forgets that she has her scars from what happened like all of them. In a way, what happened the summer previous was worse for her, because she had to watch Derek and Stiles get pulled out of the house, both of them nine-tenths dead. She had had nightmares for weeks afterwards, and often slept in the same bed as Derek and Stiles. They didn’t mind having her there. She was pack, and they were hardly up to any shenanigans. It was only after school had started again that Cora’s independent streak had started to show back up.

“Forget him,” Stiles says, and then because Cora looks heartbroken, he hastily adds, “Derek and I argued plenty in the beginning, and we turned out okay.”

“That’s true,” Cora says, brightening up.

Of course, Stiles knows there are a lot of reasons for why he and Derek had fought, and a lot of them could be traced back to the subversion of the ceremonies by the WLO in various ways. The significance placed on them had led to Stiles’ bullying and reluctance to participate or accept Derek’s offer. The loss of Derek’s brothers had made Talia put too much pressure on Derek. The wolfsbane perfume had clouded Derek’s thinking and led to him approaching Stiles in a way that had basically scared the shit out of him, even if he hadn’t admitted it.

None of that was present now, though, and Seth putting that much pressure on Cora to spend the night makes Stiles extremely unhappy. He just feels like something is wrong; he can’t put his finger on it but it’s there, under his skin, not letting go. He loves Cora like a sister, and he simply can’t believe that she’s fated to be with such an awful person.

He thinks back to what his father said. That a little paranoia was okay, as long as it wasn’t interfering with his life. Well, doing some basic checking on Seth wouldn’t interfere with his life. He has time. The problem is that he’s not sure where to start. His father had said to talk to Peter, and Stiles knows that this is Peter’s job. But every time he asks Peter about it, he ducks the question. Stiles isn’t sure why, but he suspects that Peter thinks he’s not ready, that he’s still traumatized by what had happened the previous summer.

Screw that. After some thought, he takes out his phone, setting it on the counter while he puts nuts in the food processor to make cookies, and texts Peter. ‘I solved two mysteries last night.’

There’s a long pause, as there almost always is, before Peter replies. ‘WLO cases from Duke?’

‘Yep. I’m on my A-game.’

Fifteen minutes go by before Peter replies with, ‘Come up to my room when you have a moment.’

Stiles does a celebratory fist-pump that Peter isn’t brushing him off for once, and finishes mixing the batter. It needs to refrigerate for half an hour before being made into cookies, so he rinses his hands and heads upstairs.

He’s only been in Peter’s bedroom a couple times. He’s a private person who rarely invites others in. He had never been in the one in the old house, and they’ve only lived in the new house for about a month. It’s a stark contrast to Derek’s, with its sage green walls, plants and books and other things strewn about everywhere. Peter is astringently neat; nothing is out of place. The walls are a deep blue, almost navy, and the furniture is mostly dark wood, so the room seems to absorb light. It makes it seem smaller than it is, even though there isn’t much furniture. A bed and a desk and a bureau, placed on opposite walls.
To Stiles, it looks like Peter just never finished moving in. There are no pictures on the walls, no old receipts or ticket stubs tossed across his desk like there are on Derek’s. He does have a bookshelf with a small collection of books. Peter is a voracious reader, but he keeps very little. The room just doesn’t look lived in, the way the others do. Peter drifts in and out as if he’s a ghost, never accumulating anything. Stiles knows that he’s doing a lot better than he used to – confirmation that the fire had not been an accident and the death of Kate Argent had stabilized him quite a bit – but the fact remained that Peter would never really be sane. That was something that the pack had gotten used to.

Stiles isn’t exactly comfortable in Peter’s room, but that’s more because the room just makes him feel sorry for Peter, and he knows that Peter wouldn’t want that. When he goes in, Peter is sitting on the desk – not in the desk chair but on the desk itself, his bare feet hanging down and stirring the air as they kick back and forth.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” Stiles says, closing the door behind him.

“Guilty,” Peter says. “I wanted to give you time to come to your own conclusions. I figured I shouldn’t let my paranoia become your paranoia.”

“Yeah, I have plenty of that on my own,” Stiles says. He sits down on the edge of Peter’s bed. “Dad says that a Left Hand is supposed to be paranoid.”

Peter nods slowly. “Yes. I ran a background check on you, too. As well as Jonathan, when Laura chose him. But those times it was out of an overabundance of caution. I thought to myself ‘if you don’t do this, and something happens, you will feel very stupid later’. With Seth, it was different. I ran it because I expected to find something.”

“But you didn’t,” Stiles says.

“No. He’s disappointingly typical. Two-parent home, childhood in Bakersfield, father is the assistant manager at a hardware store, mother works as an LPN at a nursing home. Moved to northern California while he was in junior high. Only child, obviously spoiled rotten, probably left alone too much. Grades were decent, nothing to write home about. Active in sports, defensive lineman in football, several wrestling trophies but nothing terribly exciting. Graduated last year and got accepted to University of California, Beacon Hills campus. The only thing that stands out about him is that nothing stands out.”

Stiles gets up abruptly and paces back and forth. “I just don’t like him,” he says.

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“Nobody likes him,” Peter says dryly. “Even Cora doesn’t like him. She’s struggling with that, but it’s true. She doesn’t understand how she can be bonded to someone that she despises.”

“She’s not the only one,” Stiles says. “Did Derek tell you about orange-bracelet?” he asks. Peter cocks his head to one side curiously, so Stiles tells him about Cora’s phone call and her excitement over the boy she most decidedly did not bring home with her.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Peter murmurs.

“Look, is it possible, even remotely, that Cora somehow got tricked into thinking the wrong person is her mate?” Stiles asks.

He expects Peter to scoff, the way everyone else seems to have automatically written this theory off. You just know when you meet the right person, everyone has said. There’s no way to fake that. So he’s startled when Peter just says, “Certainly.”
“Wha – how?” Stiles asks.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Peter says, “but with every day that goes by, I’m more convinced that that’s what has somehow happened. And you’re going to find out how.”

“I am?” Stiles narrows his eyes. “Why are you using the singular pronoun?”

“I have other things on my plate,” Peter says. “Things that don’t concern you, at least not at the moment.”

“You sound like you’re not even worried.”

Peter’s face goes from blank and placid to sharp and predatory. “I’m not worried,” he says. “I’m angry. I don’t know what’s happening, but someone is trying to hurt my pack. It is unacceptable.” His face clears. “However, you claim to be on your A-game, so I leave this in your capable hands.”

Stiles sputters. “I only said that because I wanted you to tell me what you thought! Not dump the whole thing in my lap!”

Peter shrugs.

Stiles grits his teeth. “What does Talia think about all this? She doesn’t – she can’t like him any better than the rest of us do. But she – she gushes over the asshole. It drives me fucking crazy. I kept thinking part of the reason I didn’t like him was because I was jealous.”

“That may still be,” Peter says, but then he shakes his head. “Talia does what she must. Do you understand why?”

“Clearly not,” Stiles says.

“This boy has somehow won his way into Cora’s heart. We don’t know how, but odds are good that he wants to stay there. If Talia expresses her dislike of him, he can force the issue by requesting a formal contract. That would put her in the position of having to either accept him into the pack officially, or reject him officially. And that is the last thing Talia wants, because we still don’t know who he really is or why he’s here. Talia will string him along until we’ve figured that out.”

“So you’ve talked to her about this,” Stiles says, relaxing a little.

“I don’t need to,” Peter says. “I’m her Left Hand. It’s what I do.”

“Then why are you leaving this in my lap?” Stiles asks, frustrated.

“Because Seth watches me. Have you noticed?”

“Because Seth watches me. Have you noticed?”


“He does. He’s subtle about it, more than I would have anticipated, but he behaves a little differently when he realizes I’m watching him. I think he’s smarter than he looks, and his behavior is a very specific act. It’s the purpose that I can’t fathom. If he were trying to ingratiate himself into a pack, why make everyone in the pack hate his guts?” Peter shakes his head. “There’s a piece that I’m still missing. You’re going to find it. Seth knows your history, but he’s written you off. The glorified housekeeper. Damaged.” Peter reaches out and taps the side of Stiles’ head. “But you’re not damaged, are you, Stiles?”

Peter gives him a wolfish smile. “You solved two mysteries last night, Stiles. Here’s a third for you. I’d hate for you to get bored.”

Stiles sighs and nods. “Okay,” he says.

“In any case, I made my feelings on the matter a little too clear to Seth on his second night here,” Peter says. “I’d say my temper got away with me, but that wasn’t really what happened.”

Stiles thinks back, remembering Seth ducking out of dish duty and then coming back a little pale and subdued. “Yeah, what did you even say to him that night?”

“I told him that while I had to tolerate his presence in the pack as long as Cora was declaring him as her mate, that if he had sex with her, I would remove his testicles and make him eat them,” Peter says, and Stiles winces. “Cora is under some sort of influence. I haven’t identified it yet, but it’s there. And while I’ll let him annoy her, hurt her feelings, make her uncomfortable, in the name of finding his puppet master . . . letting him rape her is out of the question.”

Stiles nods. “Okay, well . . . I’m on the case, I guess.”

“Don’t tell Derek,” Peter says, as he’s heading for the door.


“Because you’re going to be a Left Hand. You have to learn to keep secrets. Is it necessary to keep this one? Perhaps not. But you’d best get in the habit. There are things you don’t talk about. You’re the keeper of the skeletons in the closet. Don’t let them out.”

Stiles studies Peter for a few moments, then says, “Peter, what is it that you’re doing while I’m doing this?”

Peter just smiles again and says, “You’ll see.”

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I think many of you have been waiting for this....

After some thought, Stiles decides that the first thing he wants to do is identify orange-bracelet-curly-hair. He wants to know who that guy is and why he rejected Cora, if he was somehow bribed or threatened. If he really is Cora’s mate, Stiles thinks he might know it. He can vividly remember the first look he got a look at Derek. How everything inside him had spun to a halt and hummed in a pleasant sort of way.

The problem is that he really doesn’t know how to go about this. He can’t exactly ask Cora about it. Review of the records shows that there were just as many orange bracelets as green, which would give him over five hundred people to look through. He doesn’t know anybody else who attended the ceremonies who might have noticed – or does he?

Friday afternoon, he bikes over to Beacon Hills High. He hasn’t been there since he had finished up his sophomore year, nine months before. He’s not exactly happy to go back, either; the place doesn’t precisely hold fond memories for him. But it’s just a place. It can’t hurt him. He chains up his bike and heads for the gym.

Lacrosse practice is just about to get underway, but everyone stops and stares when he enters the locker room. He doesn’t quite blame the guys for not knowing what to say. Three quarters of them had been active participants in a vicious campaign to humiliate and degrade him the previous year. Then he had somehow become a hero, and everyone who had spit on him – sometimes literally – had felt ashamed of themselves. They’re not stupid enough to ask for his forgiveness, or at least most of them aren’t, but some of them are stupid enough to try to rejoice in his celebrity.

Stiles cuts that off at the knees with a casual, “Hey, guys. Danny around?”

“Oh, yeah, he uh,” someone stammers, and someone else jumps in, and eventually he manages to figure out that Danny is helping Coach and a couple other guys set some stuff up on the field. Stiles thanks them and heads outside.

“Hey, Danny!” he says, waving as he approaches, and Danny looks up and smiles. They had become unlikely friends after everything had happened, and although they weren’t close, they e-mailed regularly. Danny’s previous best friend, Jackson, had moved out of town during the autumn, and he got lonely sometimes.

“What’s up?” Danny asks, exchanging a bro-fist with Stiles.

“I have a weird question,” Stiles says.

“It would disappoint me if you didn’t,” Danny says, and Stiles laughs.

“So, during the Searching Ceremonies, my pack-sister Cora met a guy with curly hair and an orange bracelet,” Stiles says, “and for reasons that would take too long to explain, managed to
leave without getting his name or number. I’m trying to track him down.”

“I thought Cora chose someone?” Danny asks.

Stiles grimaces. “Like I said. It would take too long to explain. Just, uh, keep it on the down low, okay?”

“Sure,” Danny says, and rubs a hand over his hair. “An orange bracelet, huh? There weren’t many of those.”

Stiles frowns. “The first thing I did was check the registry, and there were almost as many orange bracelets as green, and way more than yellow.”

“In the adults, maybe,” Danny says, “but almost everyone in our age group was all in. I mean, if they weren’t, they just didn’t come, you know? Or their parents wouldn’t let them. I can only think of . . .” He counts on his fingers. “Three people I saw that were wearing orange bracelets.”

“Shit, I should have thought of that age thing and cross-referenced – well, never mind.” Stiles puts his inadequacies firmly in the back of his head. Peter has entrusted him with this, and it’s important that he doesn’t fail. It occurs to him for the first time that Peter might be testing him. It’s discouraging to say the least, and he wonders what will happen if he fails. “Okay. Three is better than none.”

“Well, one is better than three,” Danny says, “because only two of those people were guys, and only one of those guys has curly hair, so my guess is that you’re looking for Isaac Lahey.”

“Awesome,” Stiles says. “Any idea where I can find him?”

“Sure. Wait ten minutes. He’s on the team. Jersey number fourteen.”

“You’re the best,” Stiles says. Danny just smiles as if to say that he knows this, and jogs back to where the team is assembling. Stiles doesn’t want to interrupt practice, so he settles in the bleachers and takes out his phone. At least he doesn’t have a lot of cooking to do. God bless take-out night. Derek will sometimes go in early on Fridays so he can leave early, but Stiles had let him know that he had ‘errands’ to do, so he’ll be at work until five.

While he’s waiting, he reads through the background check that his father had sent him for at least the fourth time. It’s just as disappointing as Peter had said it was. He reminds himself that things aren’t always what they seem, and goes back to watching practice.

He misses this, in a way. He and Scott had never done well, had never made first line or even played in the games, but he had been on the team. He had enjoyed that, even enjoyed the bench warming, because Scott was there keeping him company. Sports were one thing that the supernatural high school did exclude him from. It simply wasn’t feasible to have humans on the same teams as supernatural creatures. Scott had joined the lacrosse team at SuperHigh, but while he would have dominated on a field of humans, he was fairly mediocre in a field of werewolves. He didn’t mind, though. He was still better than he could have been.

Still, he doesn’t regret the things that have changed. He wouldn’t go back to his life the way it was before Derek, not even for an instant. So he hangs out and watches the practice and waits for it to be over. He notices that Isaac gets pushed around a fair amount, and at one point sees some of the guys steal his lacrosse stick and play keep away with it.

Between practice and the showering and changing afterwards, it’s nearly two hours before he gets a chance to talk to Isaac. He waits outside the locker room. His guess is that Isaac will exit alone,
and he’s not wrong.


“I know who you are,” Isaac says, giving him a look that’s partly wary and partly curious. “Everyone knows who you are.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Stiles falls into step beside him. “Hey, so, do you mind if I ask you some questions about stuff that’s none of my business?”

“You can always ask,” Isaac says.

Stiles isn’t put off by his standoffishness. He’s dealt with worse; he’s dating Derek Hale. “You were at the Searching Ceremonies, right?” he asks, and Isaac nods. “I think you met Cora Hale there?” Just in case he doesn’t know, Stiles pulls a picture of her up on his phone and shows it to Isaac. He watches the other teenager carefully as he does so, but he’s good at hiding his emotions. There’s a little tic in his jaw, but that’s all. “I think she asked you out but you said no.”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. “I had the right, remember?”

“So I guess I just want to know why. If there was something that put you off, some reason that you decided you didn’t want to be involved.”

After a moment, Isaac sighs and pushes his hand through his curly mop. “You won’t like the answer much, I don’t think.”

Now they’re getting somewhere. “I live for answers I don’t like. Let’s hear it.”

“My dad didn’t want me to go to the Ceremonies. And that had nothing to do with werewolves, he just . . . my grades aren’t exactly awesome and he said I needed to concentrate on my studies and not go looking for a girlfriend. But then at school, everyone was talking about going. Some of the guys on the team asked if I was going. I said no, and they made fun of me, said only a coward wouldn’t go. So I went. I got an orange bracelet because I didn’t have the permission slip from my dad, and then when Cora approached me I thought, ‘if I come home with a werewolf girlfriend, my dad is gonna kick my ass’, so I told her I wasn’t interested.”

“Oh.” It’s not the story that Stiles expected at all. He can see why Isaac would think he wouldn’t like it, and he doesn’t, given the bullying element. He’ll have to talk to someone about that, although God only knows what he’ll say. Change takes time, and werewolves-as-status-symbols isn’t something that will fade quickly. “That sucks. Did you like her?”

“I . . . guess?” Isaac smiles a little despite himself, and it’s a puppyish smile that could probably melt hearts from twenty paces. Then his face falls. “But then afterwards I heard she chose some other guy, so I thought . . . maybe it wasn’t all that, you know?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. He knew that feeling, at least, the feeling of doubting his own reaction to Derek, of thinking that what he had felt wasn’t real, was just hormones. He sort of wants to cram Cora and Isaac into a room together and see what happens, but he’s guessing that the short answer
would be a disaster. That will have to wait. But he wants to keep Isaac close. “Hey, so, you play lacrosse, right? Have you ever seen werewolves play?”

“On TV,” Isaac says, with moderate enthusiasm. “It’s pretty awesome. I mean, the acrobatics alone, right? Do they really use reinforced nets?”

“And sticks, too,” Stiles says. “My bro Scott, he plays on the high school team. They’ve got a game this Saturday. You want to come watch?”

Isaac’s momentary boyish enthusiasm fades back into skepticism. “Why?”

“Because . . . I know what it’s like to be bullied, you know? And I watched the way they treated you out on the field. That sucks, dude. So you know, if you need a friend. I love making friends. I’m awkward as hell at it, apparently, but the sentiment is what counts, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Isaac says. “And it would be pretty awesome, I mean. To actually see a game live. But it would be weird to go by myself.”

“Two o’clock,” Stiles says. “I could pick you up.”

“Okay,” Isaac says, and that puppy-smile is back. “Sure.”

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Stiles is on his second batch of cases for the WLO now, and they’re getting progressively more difficult. Deucalion had started by sending him ones where he was almost positive that there had been WLO involvement. The second batch included ones where he wasn’t sure. Derek watches him work from where he’s sprawled out on his bed, pinning pictures to his wall and connecting strings between them. He’s been at it for most of the evening, and while Derek doesn’t mind Stiles not attending to his every whim, he thinks it’s stressing the teenager out. He can smell the change in his scent as he gets more frustrated.

“How much longer are you going to be at that?” he asks, careful to keep his tone nonjudgmental.

“I don’t know,” Stiles says absently. “A while.”

Derek sighs a little. “I’m going to go get us something to drink, okay?”

“Mmkay,” Stiles says, still not really looking up.

Part of the problem, he had admitted, was that he had finite resources to work with. When he had been working the Hale house fire, he had found connections and called other places, gotten more information. But he wasn’t technically a member of any police force, so there was only so much he could do when investigations had been closed years before.

Derek shakes his head a little and heads downstairs, thinking he’ll make some of that chamomile tea that smells nice and always mellows Stiles out. He gives a nod to Tom, who’s doing some of his own work at the kitchen table despite Cleopatra’s best efforts, before putting water on the stove and opening the cabinet.

Tom sees the yellow box come out and gives a quiet snort. “That bad, huh?”
Derek hesitates. He’s so used to living in a house where the walls have ears that he sometimes forgets that Stiles can’t hear every word he says outside the bedroom. “He’s really . . . pushing himself. That missing persons case he did from the last set really got to him.”

There’s a brief pause while Tom takes off his reading glasses and rubs a hand over his face. “I know that finding a body wasn’t the answer that the family wanted, but at least it was an answer. He can’t go back in time and prevent the murder.”

“I know. But, well. You know Stiles.”

“That I do.” Tom watches Derek get out two of the tea bags and says, “Make me some of that while you’re at it, will you? I feel like I could use it.”

“Okay. What are you working on?” Derek asks, more to be polite than out of actual interest.

“Nothing as exciting as that,” Tom says. “Just crunching some numbers. What’s he working on now?”

“A case from a couple years ago where a teenaged girl was killed. Werewolf. Ex-boyfriend was arrested and convicted, but maintains his innocence. But he’s been at it for hours and he can’t find any evidence that the WLO was involved. It’s frustrating him.”

“Well, police work can be frustrating,” Tom says, “but I think this will be good for him, especially after what happened with Kate. He’s managed to convince himself that he handled it terribly and everyone would have been killed if Peter hadn’t been following him around that day.”

Derek grimaces a little. “That doesn’t make any sense. I mean, if Peter hadn’t killed Kate, Stiles still could have come to the house and done exactly as he did, and we would have gotten out safely. You know, gunshot wounds notwithstanding. The real danger would have been to you, and Stiles still could have called you to let you know what was up. You could have handled it.”

“Trust me, I’ve mentioned all this to him in detail,” Tom says dryly, then shrugs. “He needs time, that’s all. But solving the first round of mysteries really did him a lot of good, I think. Proving to himself that he could still put pieces together and solve puzzles.” Tom pushes the folder he’s working on aside and says, “How’s things at the house?”

“Ugh,” Derek says, succinctly.

“That bad, huh?”

“I hate this guy,” Derek admits. “But Cora’s my sister, and I owe her so much for helping me out with Stiles last year. I never would have gotten things straightened out with him if it hadn’t been for her. I told myself ‘as long as he makes her happy’, but she’s not happy. She knows that nobody likes him and it’s making her miserable, and I don’t have a clue how to handle it.”

“Have you had a chat with this guy about his behavior?” Tom asks.

“Cora says she’s talked to him about it.”

“Okay. But have you?” Tom asks, and Derek shakes his head. “Look. I get that you want to be accepting of Cora’s mate, especially because of what happened when your mom rejected Stiles. But you’re still Cora’s big brother. It is one hundred percent acceptable for you to pull this guy aside and say ‘hey, I’m really happy my sister found her mate, but if you break her heart, I’ll break your face’. That’s what a big brother is supposed to do.”
Derek laughs despite himself. “I guess you have a point there.”

“Well, from the way Stiles talks about it, someone had better have a talk with him about his behavior, or it’s only going to get worse,” Tom says. “Right now all you’re doing is showing him that he can get away with anything he wants.”

“Ugh,” Derek says again. “Okay, yeah. Thanks.” The tea kettle is starting to whistle, so Derek pours water into three mugs. He’s about to say something else when there’s a muffled shout from upstairs and Stiles comes barreling down them.

“I’ve got it!” he declares, his face aglow with excitement, and he starts talking a mile a minute about how the boyfriend couldn’t have done it because of a broken arm he had gotten in first grade that had made him left-handed instead of right-handed and knife-wound patterns and something about the purchase of silver nitrate on the black market that could be linked back to the WLO.

“Good job, kid,” Tom says, blowing on the top of his tea to cool it off.

“I already e-mailed Duke and they’ll probably have to do a million things to prove it, but maybe at least the innocent guy can get out of jail now and I still have three more cases to do but I’ll work on them over the weekend. Derek, come take my clothes off.”

“For the love of God, Stiles,” Tom groans, as Derek just gives him a what-can-you-do shrug and allows Stiles to drag him up the stairs.

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Stiles doesn’t want Isaac to feel awkward or singled out, so he turns the lacrosse game into something of a party. He invites Heather and Danny, and he agrees to meet Erica and Boyd there, and of course Allison is going because she goes to all of Scott’s games. Having Allison with him when he picks Isaac up seems to help relax the teenager, who’s tense and nervous, looking over his shoulder as he gets into the car.

“So does your dad not like werewolves?” Allison asks him, as they hit the road.

“Well, my dad doesn’t really like anybody,” Isaac says. “He’s not into all that anti-werewolf garbage, though. When it came to my grades, he actually gave me a choice that I could skip the Ceremonies or quit lacrosse. I told him I would skip the Ceremonies because that didn’t seem like a big deal at the time. I mean, it wasn’t until everyone at school made it that way.”

“It still shouldn’t be, but change takes time, I guess,” Stiles says, with a sigh. He wants to keep the conversation off the Ceremonies as much as possible, because he doesn’t want to make Isaac uncomfortable. “Schoolwork can be a bitch though, right? I’m still getting back into the swing of full days.”

“It’s not that my grades are terrible everywhere, I’m doing fine in history and English, it’s just . . . chemistry, ugh.”

“Let me guess, you have Harris?” Stiles asks, and Isaac nods. “Is he still a complete dick and a half?”

Isaac laughs a little. “He’s more like two dicks now.”
They chat about school and asshole teachers and Isaac wants to know what SuperHigh is like, so Stiles tells him all about it and thinks that if they can straighten out whatever the hell is going on with Cora, maybe someday he can go there too. Allison’s happy at her own school, and her father would freak out if she attended SuperHigh, so nobody has tried to convince her to go there.

They meet the others there, and Isaac gives Danny a sideways look like he’s not sure he’s allowed to be breathing the same air as the insanely popular teenager, but as usual Danny is funny and mellow and puts him at ease. Erica looks at Isaac like she’s thinking about eating him for an afternoon snack, but Boyd picks her up by the waist and tells her to stop trying to scare people.

Cora and Seth aren’t there, which Stiles had been banking on. Seth scoffs at lacrosse in general, as it’s clearly nowhere near as awesome a sport as football, and nobody had bothered to invite them. Stiles had heard Derek talk about maybe he and Seth would go out and have some ‘man time’ to get to know each other or some bullshit like that. He’s not sure what Derek’s up to, but suspects he wants to get Seth alone so he can give him the shovel talk.

Hopefully, in the long run that talk will be unnecessary, but Stiles is beginning to think that it’s going to take a while to get everything sorted out. He’s already chafing under Peter’s edict not to tell Derek. Since things had gone so badly in the beginning, he doesn’t keep secrets from Derek. He doesn’t keep them from his father anymore, either, and he’s longing to lay it all out at the sheriff’s feet and see what he thinks of it.

But if Peter is testing his worthiness to be the Left Hand, he can’t go against his instructions. Even though he himself isn’t sure about the whole thing. He supposes that he’ll make a better Left Hand than either Derek or Cora, but that isn’t actually saying very much. But he doesn’t want to let Peter down. Not when Peter is trusting him to take care of the pack. Not after Peter had saved both Derek and Sheriff Stilinski’s lives the previous summer.

After a little while, he’s able to loosen up and enjoy the game. It’s spectacular, as the games always are. The rules are a little different for supernatural games – there are a lot more types of fouls, for one things – but the basics are the same, and it’s easy enough to follow. There’s a large television screen at one end which will show things in slow motion to make it easier to figure out what just happened.

“Dude, this is like the Quidditch World Cup,” Isaac says, with that puppyish grin. All skullduggery aside, Stiles is glad that he invited him. He seems to be having a good time, and he looks like the kind of person who doesn’t have enough fun in his life.

Stiles gets some pictures of the group here and there. He tries to be subtle about it, mostly using his camera to take pictures of the game. Afterwards they go out for ice cream together. Scott joins them, and although he spends a lot of time canoodling with Allison, he also goes out of his way to make Isaac feel welcome, too. It turns out that they know each other, at least vaguely, because they had been benchwarmers together on the lacrosse team the previous year. Stiles had had to quit lacrosse after the Searching Ceremony, so he hadn’t realized.

He takes Isaac home afterwards and heads back to the Hale house with Scott and Allison. He’s glad that dinner has been in the crock pot all day and he won’t have a lot to do, because it’s after five. Cora and Derek are both there, but not Seth. “Did you guys go out?” Stiles asks, giving Derek a kiss hello.

With a somewhat sour expression, Derek says, “Well, we had planned to. The weather was good and we were thinking about going to the park to fly kites, but apparently such activities are juvenile and beneath Seth’s station in life. Also there was a football game on TV that apparently couldn’t be missed.”
Stiles tries not to grimace. One of the things he loves about Cora is that she’s able to take such joy in simple things like flying kites or building sandcastles. “Tell me you two went out, at least,” he says.

“We did,” Derek says. With a glance over at where Cora’s brooding in the bay window at the front of the house, he says, “I think we had a pretty good time.”

So there was that, at least. Stiles shakes his head a little and goes into the kitchen. It’s Saturday and everyone is there, so things are noisy and chaotic as usual. He puts beef stew and baskets of rolls on the table. Cora perks up once she’s surrounded by her family and everyone’s trying to make her feel better.

After dinner, Laura and Jonathan leave for a movie. Talia and Aaron are going out with some friends. Stiles hopes that baby-sitting will go better this time than it did last time. Once the kids are distracted with their toys, he says, “Oh, I got some great photos of the game today, wanna see?”

“Sure,” Derek says, settling on the sofa next to him and pulling Cora down on his other side. She leans over to see as Stiles slides through the album on his phone. Most of them are of the game, and he did get some pretty good shots, although a lot of them are blurry with people who move too fast to be caught on film.

Stiles has gone through the photo album twice in preparation for this, so he knows when the picture of Isaac is coming up. “These are just some shots of the group of us,” he says casually, as he keeps scrolling. “Everyone was having such a great time that I just took some photos. There’s Heather and her new boyfriend, Steve. Check out Allison’s face there, that was right after Scott scored that goal . . . there’s Danny, oh, and he brought a friend of his from school, that’s Isaac.”

He keeps his tone carefully casual and even, but he looks up at Cora when he says it. She flinches like she’s been slapped as his picture comes up on the screen. Derek looks over at her, feeling her body go stiff next to his. “You okay?” he asks.

“Oh, yeah,” she says hastily. “Yeah, I’m . . . I’m fine.”

Stiles continues scrolling through the photos and narrating each picture. Isaac appears in a couple more of them, although he was careful not to focus on him too much. Cora excuses herself before he can get through another half dozen, and flees the room.

Derek frowns after her. “What was that about?”

Stiles slides back to the first picture of Isaac. “Meet orange-bracelet-curly-hair,” he says. He’s decided that he can’t keep everything from Derek. It just won’t work, for one thing. Derek knows him too well, and he’s also been hovering over Cora, which isn’t surprising. Besides, they had made a deal about him keeping secrets. So he’s decided that although he won’t tell Derek what he’s been actively forbidden to tell him – that Peter suspects trickery and has enlisted Stiles to investigate – there’s no reason he can’t tell Derek some of what he finds out. Frankly, Derek is smart enough to figure out that there’s some sort of skullduggery at work anyway.

Derek studies it for a long moment. “Is he a dudebro?” he asks.

“No,” Stiles says, with a snort of laughter. “Actually he seems like a pretty cool guy and has received no undue influence.”

“So . . . perfect for our pack,” Derek concludes.

“Nobody is perfect for a pack,” Stiles says, “but yeah.” He heaves a sigh. Since he doesn’t want
Derek asking a bunch of questions, he adds, “I guess I’ll tell Uncle P about it.” He knows that that will satisfy Derek. He’s a beta, and he was brought up to send things through the proper pack hierarchy. If something is going on, Peter will find out about it.

As expected, Derek nods, and some of the tension goes out of his shoulders. “How about a game or two of Mario Kart?” he asks.

“Ooh ooh yeah!” Tyler says, diving over. He’s no good at the game whatsoever, but it never gets him down. Stiles has taken to plunking him down in front of it with a controller that isn’t plugged in while he and Derek play. He never notices, and generally assumes that he’s controlling one of the cars on the screen regardless.

“Sure,” Stiles says, smiling. “Sounds good to me.”

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Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Ugh, I'm so sick, I have like an ear/nose/throat infection of doom.... cheer me up by leaving me some comments, y/y? =D

Since Seth seems to love football so much, Derek asks if he wants to go toss a football around. That’s what guys do, right? He’s a little lost on the topic of typical interaction with teenaged boys. Stiles is certainly anything but typical. But Seth agrees eagerly enough, and they retreat to the edge of the property. It’s a little chilly, but as long as they’re jogging around, they can stay warm enough.

Derek lets the ball go back and forth a few times before saying anything. He keeps the strength of his throws pulled back a little. Regardless of Seth’s purported skill at the game, he’s still human. “So,” he says, in what he hopes comes off as a casual manner, “what do you think of the pack so far?”

“It’s awesome, man,” Seth says, with apparent enthusiasm. “I mean, just being in a werewolf pack would be awesome, but this one, man. Talia’s so hardcore and the rest of you guys have all been great about everything. And Cora, of course, she’s the best, right?”

Derek manages another smile and throws the ball again. He resists the urge to try to punt it off Seth’s head. “Well, we obviously all think she’s amazing. And I’m glad you think we’ve been great about everything.” It means that they haven’t been too open about their dislike. That or Seth is lying through his teeth.

“I can’t wait ‘til I get the Bite,” Seth says, “but Cora says it’s tacky to ask this soon.”

“Very,” Derek agrees dryly. “Would you still want to be part of the pack if you couldn’t have the Bite?”

“Well, sure,” Seth says, blinking as if he doesn’t understand the question. “I mean, Cora’s my mate, so . . . that’s how it works, right?”

Derek nods. “Yeah, but sometimes people get annoyed if they’re told they can join a pack but can’t be changed. And Talia may have to talk it over with some of the local alphas, since our pack has grown so much recently. They may decide we can’t have any other wolves right now.” Derek delivers this with a straight face even though it’s pretty much bullshit. Talia could talk to the other alphas in the area about this, but she doesn’t have to.

“That’s stupid, though, out of all the people you guys have added, only one got turned into an actual werewolf,” Seth says, rolling his eyes, “and like four or five werewolves died in the fire, so really you’re just replacing them.”

Derek stops dead. He has to take a deep breath before he can speak. “Okay. Advice time.”

“Lay it on me,” Seth says easily, tossing the football to him.

“First.” Derek catches the ball and holds onto it rather than throwing it again. “Never say anything
like that again. To me, or Cora, or anyone else in the pack.”

“Say what? Which part?”

Derek loses his temper and throws the ball harder than he should so it nails Seth in the shoulder. “The idiotic part where you suggested that it’s all about numbers and my family is replaceable. Piece of advice number two: think before you let words fall out of your mouth.”

“Ow, what the fuck, dude,” Seth complains, rubbing at his shoulder. “Don’t take everything so personally, Jesus.”

“Don’t bitch. I’m trying to help you even though you’ve said some incredibly insensitive things. I’m allowed to take it personally when you imply that my dead family can be replaced.” Derek arches an eyebrow at the younger man. “And if you didn’t mean it that way, we’re back to you needing to learn to think before you speak.”

“No one told me werewolves were so fucking sensitive about everything,” Seth says, sulking.

“See, you’re doing it again. Right now. Not thinking. And yes, we are sensitive. About as sensitive as anyone else, really. You just reduced my murdered family down to numbers, and when I try to say something about it, all you’re doing is complaining about how badly I reacted to something that was pretty fucking hurtful, instead of taking my advice and thinking about some of the crap you have a tendency to say all the time.” Derek stops and takes a breath, then shrugs. “You said you like the pack. I figured you would appreciate someone saying something about this before someone loses their temper and does more than toss a football at you.”

“Well, fine, I’m sorry.” Seth says, not sounding sorry at all. “And I’m sorry I made fun of Sylvia for chewing on a dog toy, and anything else you think I’ve said that I should be sorry for.”

“And?” Derek says expectantly.

“And what?”

“And you won’t do it again and you’ll learn to think before you speak,” Derek says, then adds pleasantly, “because if you keep upsetting my sister, I’ll bury you. And I know she’s talked to you about some of this stuff.”

“Maybe you just think she’s upset because you’re upset,” Seth says.

“Nope. I think she’s upset because I can tell.” Derek taps the side of his nose. He could say it was because Cora talks to him, but he doesn’t want to give Seth a reason to be angry at Cora. “Besides that, we’re siblings, we’re pack. None of us like seeing the others upset, so if you hurt me, or Stiles, or Sylvia, you hurt Cora, too.”

“You really make being in a werewolf pack sound like a blast,” Seth says.

“If that’s what you think, maybe you should ask yourself what you really want out of this.”

“Whatsoever, dude,” Seth says. “I want your sister, you know, my mate? So maybe I’ll just go spend some time with her.”

“See, it doesn’t work that way. Because we’re her pack.”

“So what, that means everyone has to get along like all roses and shit?” Seth asks, with an incredulous snort. “Is that what happened when you brought Stiles home?”
“No, but it means that we all have to be able to sit down to meals and movie nights and be civil. It means that you can’t be part of the pack if the only pack member you can handle being around is Cora. And you can’t separate her from her pack. Sure, we can talk about when Stiles joined. No, he didn’t get along with my mother in the beginning. But he did get along with Peter and Cora and the kids, and he never had a problem with Laura or Jonathan. He and my mom worked things out.”

Seth sighs. “Are you done?”

“I don’t know. If you stop acting like a jerk and upsetting Cora, then yes. You keep acting like you have been, then no. We’ll just have to see where life takes us.” Since he obviously won’t be getting anywhere any time soon, he turns to walk away. Then he says over his shoulder, “And by the way, I hate football.”

He heads inside and looks around for Stiles. He’s up in their bedroom, typing away on his laptop, and he looks up when Derek comes in but only says, “Hey,” instead of giving him his typical enthusiastic greeting.

“Hey,” Derek says back, and sits down on the end of the bed. He would give Stiles a hug, but that would have him looking over Stiles’ shoulder, which would easily turn into an accidental invasion of privacy. “What’s up?” he asks, rather than bitching about how he’d like to use Seth’s head as a bowling ball.

“Nothing, just . . . doing some homework and thinking about one of those cases Duke gave me.” Stiles rubs the heel of his hand over his face. “How’d your Man Time with Seth go?”

“I bunted a football off him. My plants are more receptive to advice.” Derek flops backwards on the bed. “On the upside, I can say with honesty that I warned him, when I have to go bury him in the woods.”

Stiles gives a snort. “Like you’d be the one doing the burying.”

“Well, Uncle Peter can say I warned him.” Derek shuffles around so he’s lying on his side, facing Stiles. “Also, I hate football. How are the cases going?”

“Not so good. I’m stuck on this last one Duke sent me, and . . . it’s a bad one.”

“How long have you been working on it?”

“Off and on for three days,” Stiles says. “I tried to take a break by doing my homework and that was just a gigantic mistake.”

“That’s not going well either, I take it?” Derek ponders what Stiles said. “Can you really call yourself stuck if it’s only been three days?”

Stiles blinks. “Did I – did I use the wrong word?” He sounds a little panicked. “I thought it was stuck. Is it not stuck?”

“No, you used the right word, or at least the word you meant to use.” Derek sees the relief on Stiles’ face and decides not to make a big deal out of this by attempting to soothe him. Telling him that he hadn’t messed up should be enough. “I’m just saying that three days isn’t very long. I mean, you’re good at this, but that doesn’t mean you can create miracles.”

“Yeah, you’re right, but . . . this isn’t like when I was trying to solve mysteries around here and I had to gather information. I have all the info. I just can’t . . . fit it together right.”
“And neither could a bunch of people before you, and they all worked on it for longer than three
days, I bet,” Derek says. “Are you sure you have all the info?”

“Well, I have all the info that I’m gonna get,” Stiles says dryly, “but yeah, this one was actually
very thoroughly investigated, just never solved.”

“Then I’d give it a break for, say, the week and then come back to it.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Stiles pushes back from the desk with a sigh. “So no luck with Seth,
huh? I’d like to say I’m surprised, except for the part where I’m totally not.”

“Mm hm.” There’s a moment of silence. “Okay, I lied. I’m going to tell you some of the stuff he
said.”

Amused, Stiles spins around in his desk chair and then plops onto the bed next to Derek. “Yes, get
it off your chest. Your amazing, muscular chest,” he adds, rubbing a hand up and down it.

Derek laughs at that, and relaxes a little. “He practically opens with ‘I can’t wait ‘til I get the Bite,
but Cora says it’s tacky to ask’. I bet that’s not the only thing Cora’s told him.”

Stiles frowns a little, thinking about what Peter had said about Seth trying to force a contract. He
wishes again that he could tell Derek about their suspicions. “Yeah, I bet not.”

“So I, uh, may have implied that Mom might not be able to change him, pack politics and stuff.
Just to see what he would do.”

“Oooh, that’s an interesting twist,” Stiles says, wiggling closer and making himself comfortable.
“What’d he say?”

“Well, ‘of course’ what he really wants is Cora, but that it doesn’t make sense that Mom might not
be able to change him since only Scott had been turned recently but ‘like four or five werewolves
died in the fire’.” Derek makes a sour face. “That might be when I hit him with the football.”

Stiles grimaces a little and says, “Well, to be fair, you were bullshitting him, so it’s not entirely
surprising that he called you on your bullshit. Subtlety isn’t really your forte.”

“I’m not actually sure that was it,” Derek says, although he’ll admit that Stiles is correct. “He did
call my bluff when he asked how things had gone when you joined the pack.”

“Yikes. It wasn’t this bad, was it?”

“Holy fuck, no. You slotted in like a missing puzzle piece in comparison.” He laced his fingers
through Stiles’. “You had your issues with Mom, and to a lesser extent Dad, since he tried to
smooth things over, but you got along with everyone else. Who does Seth get along with?”

“He doesn’t even get along with Cora,” Stiles agrees.

“Exactly.” Derek tugs Stiles closer. “This is all wrong on so many levels.”

“Well, fortunately for us, it’s not our job to fix it,” Stiles says, “and unfortunately for us, I still have
a five-page paper on Thomas Hardy to write.”

“Before when?”

Stiles squirms. “Tomorrow . . .?”
“Oh jeez.” There go his hopes of sex.

“Relax! It’s only three PM. And I’ve even read the book I’m writing about.”

Derek actually laughs. “Have you started it yet?”

“I have two pages of fluent bullshit already written,” Stiles says, “but then I got distracted by my detective work. Isn’t that stuff approximately five hundred times more important?”

“Nope.” Derek smirks. “Because your high school diploma is important to future detective work.”

“Apparently not,” Stiles gripes, but he rolls off the bed and goes back to his laptop. “I guess there’s something to be said for a book where a woman throws a pig’s dick at a guy.”

“Gross. You want incentive?”

“Absolutely!”

“Finish it in time to actually sleep and I promise us spectacular wake-up sex.”

Stiles gave him the side-eye and said, “There’s no such thing as spectacular wake-up sex at six AM, which is when we would need to have it if I’m going to make it to my English class.”

“Which would you rather have? Coffee before school or sex?”

Stiles sputters. “You – you can’t ask me that! That’s sacrilege!”

Derek laughs. “Well, maybe if it’s a good paper, you can have both.”

“My papers are always good papers,” Stiles grumbles. “Now stop pestering me, I’m trying to work.”

Derek makes a face at him, but then leans over and drops a chaste kiss on the back of his neck before going to get a book.

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After some thought, Stiles sets up his posters for the new mystery in the guest room. There’s no reason that Derek would ever be in there, so he won’t see what Stiles is up to. As for his father, well, Tom has enough to do. If he stumbles upon them, Stiles will just tell him that they’re for a WLO case, and he probably won’t look hard enough to figure out that Stiles is lying.

He compiles everything he’s learned about Seth Freudenberg on one poster and puts it in the center. Isaac gets about half of a poster, not that Stiles thinks anything on it is relevant. As far as he can tell, Isaac is completely innocent. He refused Cora at the ceremonies, but odds were good that they would have gravitated back towards each other sooner rather than later, if Seth hadn’t showed up.

The problem with the information he compiles is that none of it is interesting whatsoever. He can research Seth’s college and his family and his roommate until he goes blue in the face, but there’s nothing.
He wants advice, but Peter is barely around, and there’s nobody else he can talk to. He’s a little resentful of Peter, to be honest. He feels like he’s been thrown into the deep end of the pool without a life preserver, and he’s drowning, fast.

He just doesn’t understand the why of what’s happening. If Seth wanted to ingratiate himself into a pack, why is he pissing everyone off? And if that’s not his goal, what the hell is it? To cause enough strife to destroy the pack entirely? If that’s so, he obviously doesn’t understand anything about how werewolf packs work. To try to break Cora away from the pack and get her to leave it? It might work, but again, why?

There’s something he’s missing. Probably many things. And in absence of any better leads, he starts doing research on the many enemies of the Hale family. What happened the previous summer had shaken a lot of foundations. A lot of people were happy with the results, but plenty of people weren’t. They had gotten their share of hate mail. Most of it was generic, but some of it was truly creepy.

With a little fast-talking, Stiles manages to get copies of most of it, either from his father or from Talia’s office. He starts going through every letter, looking for the outliers, people who really seemed like they were going to do something. Each of them got their own board, and slowly, the guest room started to compile actual information. He wasn’t sure if any of it was going to be worth anything in the long run, but it was better than staring at his Wall of Seth and feeling useless.

To distract himself from that, he’s also working on one of Deucalion’s cases. It’s a horrible, ugly affair from about six years previous. Someone had broken into the nursery of a major hospital and killed the babies that had been born to werewolf couples. Some of them could have been human – it was virtually impossible to tell with infants. Laura and Jonathan hadn’t been sure that Sylvia was human until shortly after her first birthday. But the killer had been indiscriminate. If the baby had even one werewolf parent, it was killed.

Obviously, there had been a huge uproar and a thorough investigation, but no real suspects were ever identified and the case remained open to this day.

It didn’t seem like Kate’s style to Stiles. From her involvement with the Hales as well as some of her other crimes, she focused on adults, and large packs. In fact, he’s not sure if the WLO is involved at all. It seems like the work of some lone madman.

He’s been combing all available archives for any similar crimes, but so far, he’s come up empty. And the case bothers him. Of course it does. Nobody could look at pictures of dead babies without being bothered. He’s spending too much time on it and he knows it. He blew off a biology assignment and his teacher hadn’t been pleased. Now he’s supposed to be preparing to give his book report the next day but he keeps thinking back to the case and getting preoccupied with the details.

He’s at home, by himself, which is on purpose. Derek had asked about coming over, but Stiles had said – quite truthfully – that if Derek came over they would just wind up having sex all evening, and he really does have schoolwork he should be doing. It feels weird to be alone, although his dad is just downstairs. He finally collapses into bed and stirs restlessly most of the night. He hasn’t been sleeping well lately. Too much going on. Too much to worry about. And he never sleeps well when he’s alone in his bed anymore.

It’s funny, because he wouldn’t have expected it to affect him so much, being human. But Derek feels like an integral part of him now, and being separated makes him uneasy, uncomfortable. At night, he lies staring at the ceiling and wishing Derek was there, wondering what he’s up to. He knows Derek feels the same way.
He supposes that they both have a lot of psychological trauma which is contributing to it, but he’s willing to bet that at its core, it’s because of the mating bond. He lies there and wonders if Peter has ever slept peacefully since Olivia’s death. If Peter lies awake every night, wishing that he wasn’t alone.

Finally, he drifts into an exhausted doze.

The next day is a bad one. He knows it’s going to be bad from the time he’s been up half an hour, when he’s in the kitchen trying to tell his father what he’s planning for dinner that weekend, and he’s losing a lot of words. “You look tired,” his father observes, which is putting it mildly.

“Yeah, I didn’t sleep well,” Stiles says. “You know, the whole mate-bond thing. I’ll sleep at the den tonight and feel better tomorrow.”

Tom’s eyes narrow. He clearly suspects that something’s going on that Stiles isn’t telling him about, but he doesn’t push.

Stiles gets to school and promptly spends two entire minutes tugging on his own hair and trying to remember the word ‘chlorophyll’. “I did the reading, I did, I did,” he swears, leaving his hair in disheveled spikes behind his hands.

“Okay, Stiles,” his teacher says quietly, “I believe you, let’s move on.”

He thinks that the teachers have a system, a way to communicate to each other when Stiles is having a rough day. Nobody else calls on him, even though he raises his hand twice, and when he goes into his literature class, Mr. Brown asks him if he’s sure he wants to give his book report today. Stiles says he is, he’s fine. He has notecards. He’ll just read it off the notecards.

It’s a stupid idea and he knows it, but he’s desperate to show everyone that he’s okay. He can handle this. He can solve cases for Duke and be the pack’s Left Hand and help his sister and do his school work and still get home in time to make a pie for dessert. He can do this.

“So, I did my report on Jude the Obscure,” he says, which he hated and had regretted three chapters in, “by Thomas Hardy. Which really can be read as . . .”

He blanks. He looks down at his notes, but the word he wants isn’t there.

“A . . . that thing when you . . . talk about why you don’t like something . . .”

“Criticism?” Brown offers quietly.

“Yes, thank you, sorry. A criticism of religion and its effect on society, particularly when it comes to . . .”

He blanks again. The word isn’t there. How can the word not be there? It’s a word he probably uses twice every day.

“Mating . . . no . . . I’m sorry . . .” Stiles rubs both hands through his hair. “I swear to God, I practiced this last night . . .”

“It’s fine, Stiles, why don’t you just – “

“No, I can do this, what’s the word for a permanent hook-up?”

“Marriage,” Scott shouts, practically tripping over himself to supply the word.
“Right, okay, because Jude and his lover Sue are shunned by society for living together in sin and they have several children together, one of whom . . .”

He flounders again. He doesn’t even think it’s a word he’s missing. It’s like an entire train of thought has derailed, leaving no survivors.

And then he hears it, the worst thing, the tiniest little giggle from the audience. Whoever laughs stifles it quickly, but not before Stiles hears. And he can’t blame them, maybe he would laugh if he was in their shoes, but in his current state, it makes him want to burst into tears.

“Oh my God!” he blurs out. “The book is depressing as fuck, the theme is that religion is stupid, don’t bang your cousin, never marry a woman who throws a pig’s dick in your face, and if your son is creepy enough to call him ‘Little Father Time’, don’t leave him alone with your other kids. Mic drop, done.” He grabs his backpack and practically runs out of the classroom.

He heads for the nurse’s office because it’s too early to just go home. He tells her that he has a stomach ache and curls up on one of the beds, wishing that he had gotten more sleep. “Do you just want to go home, sweetie?” she asks. “I could call your dad – “

“No, I don’t want to bug him,” Stiles says miserably. “There’s only one period left, I’ll just wait and then I can hitch a ride with Scott or Cora.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” she says.

Scott knows exactly where he’s gone, and bare seconds after the last bell has rung, he pokes his head into the nurse’s office. “Your chariot awaits,” he says.

“You wanna talk?” Scott asks.

Stiles shakes his head.

“Kay,” Scott says. He starts telling Stiles about how he’s glad he missed the rest of English class anyway, because he had to listen to book reports on The Pearl and Ethan Frome after he was gone. “You’re totally lucky you missed it,” he says.

Stiles nods a little and decides that he needs a break. He’s going to go home and make some gingersnaps. Derek loves gingersnaps, and he likes to make a good dessert on the nights when it’s take-out night and he doesn’t have to cook. They’re going to order Chinese food and then he’s going to curl up on the sofa with Derek and go to sleep. It sounds great. Scott picks up Allison from school. Cora’s not there; she’s gone out somewhere with Seth. In truth, Stiles is grateful for her absence, and especially grateful for Seth’s.

He listens to Scott and Allison canoodle at the kitchen table while he gets out the ingredients he’ll need. Flour, molasses, salt, cinnamon –

“Oh God,” he says, staring at the two little canisters.

“What’s up?” Scott asks.

“I can’t – I can’t remember the recipe. I don’t remember if it needs baking powder or baking soda. Oh my God.”

“Why don’t you look at the recipe?” Allison asks.
“I don’t have it written down!” Stiles feels himself starting to panic, feels his breath start to whistle in his throat. “It was – it was my mom’s recipe, we always made it together, I don’t – I don’t have it anywhere!”


“It’s not going to be okay!” Stiles protests. “It was my mother’s recipe!”

“Oh, but,” Scott says carefully, “you’re obviously really stressed out today, and you know you have more trouble when you’re stressed, so if you just leave it and come back to it tomorrow, you’ll probably remember. Or if you don’t want to wait, we could try making two batches, one with each, and seeing which one comes out right.”

The practical solution eases the panic back a bit. Stiles gulps air and sinks into a chair. “Okay, yeah,” he says. “We can – we can do that if we have to. You’re right. I should just – I should try it this weekend when I’m not as stressed. I’ll probably remember then.”

“Okay,” Scott says, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “Hey, I’ll take you down to the grocery – we can get some fruit and ice cream for dessert tonight, okay?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

The endorphins and adrenaline that come along with a minor panic attack leave him numb and drained, almost sleepy. He dozes off in the passenger seat of the Jeep while Scott drives, and Scott doesn’t wake him, leaving him there while he runs into the store. In fact, Stiles doesn’t wake until the owner of the car parked next to them gets in and slams the door with a loud bang. Then he jolts back to full awareness, flailing. He looks down at his own chest, expecting to see blood there, but he’s whole and undamaged.

“Jesus,” he says under his breath, trying not to hyperventilate. He hasn’t had that reaction to a loud noise in months. He does some deep-breathing exercises that his therapist had taught him until Scott gets back. He doesn’t say anything about it. He just needs some sleep.

“Hey, so, I was thinking,” Scott says. “Date night tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, with a sigh.

“Well, I think that you and Derek should go out somewhere fun. Me and Allison can watch the kids.”

“Sure you can handle them?” Stiles asks, smiling despite himself.

“Yeah, sure, my mom can come over and help out. She loves the little ankle-biters, and she can handle just about anything. I mean, she handled us. And you seriously need a break, dude.”


~ ~ ~ ~
Stiles does feel a lot better after ‘date night’ with Derek, and his mate is blessedly tacit on any subject that might stress him out. They eat bacon cheeseburgers and talk about lacrosse and gardening and video games, then go to a movie. He gets a solid night of sleep and wakes up on Sunday feeling a lot better.

Sunday mornings always entail brunch, and Stiles is kept busy most of the day with his denmaking. He makes a batch of the ginger molasses cookies with zero effort needed. (It’s baking soda, of course it’s baking soda, how could he have not known that?) He also chops a huge variety of vegetables and fruits and cheese to put into little bags that the pack can bring in their lunches in the upcoming week.

Sundays are family time. Talia does her best not to work and Aaron can usually be persuaded not to go off chasing leads on stories. Derek and Jonathan both work weekdays. Laura has been talking about going back to work when Sylvia turns two, but for now she’s still staying at home. Scott and Allison are over; so are Melissa and Tom. There’s a variety of television-watching and game-playing. It’s cold and rainy, so they’re all inside. Even Peter is there, surprising given his notable absences lately.

Cora is the only one not present. Cora and Seth. She had called late last night and said that she was going to stay the night at Seth’s place. Nobody was quite sure how to handle it, but Talia said it was fine. Stiles suspects that Talia knows what Peter has threatened Seth with, if he touches Cora, and that will have to be enough.

That’s all fine and good, but she had said she would be home in time for brunch Sunday, and she wasn’t. When Aaron calls her, she’s giggly and unapologetic. They slept in, she says. She’ll be home in time for dinner.

Her absence casts a notable pall on the room, but everyone is doing their best to ignore it. The human members of the pack don’t feel it as keenly, and it’s hard to stay gloomy while Allison is there being a Disney princess and Scott is his usual adorkable self. The teenagers and Derek settle down into a game of Apples to Apples, which Tom and Melissa join in.

Talia is in the kitchen getting herself a fresh mug of tea when her phone rings. She picks it up and says, “Hello,” and then moments later, “How are you? . . . yes, he’s here. Yes, that should be fine. Okay. Sure. Would you like to stay for dinner? Of course, I understand. See you soon.”

Stiles looks up as she puts down her phone. “Company?”
“Duke is going to drop by with some new cases for you,” she says. “He said he was just passing through on his way home from San Francisco.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, and tries to sound enthusiastic. He hasn’t made his way through half of the last batch that Deucalion had given him. “New cases, yay.”

Talia’s eyes narrow. So do Tom’s. It looks like there might be further questioning along these lines, but then there’s the noise of a car door outside. “Cora’s home,” Talia says, and everyone forgets about Stiles and his issues. A bare moment later, she huffs out a breath and says, “She’s with Seth.”

Nobody really has much to say to that, either, but Cora is welcomed home with her usual level of bounciness and Seth exchanges dude nods with Scott and Stiles, and grudgingly with Derek. Stiles invites them to sit down and play Apples to Apples. Seth thinks they should play something more interesting, like poker. “You want to play poker with a bunch of people who can hear when you’re lying?” Stiles asks skeptically. “Okay, sure.”

Seth is forced to admit that he hasn’t thought about that, and in the end they wind up playing Monopoly, a game that Stiles has always hated. But he puts up with it, because he can’t always get his way, after all.

The minute Deucalion arrives, he uses that as an excuse to abandon his post. He hears the knock on the front door and leaps to answer it. Talia still gets there first, giving Stiles an amused arch of her eyebrows as she opens the door. Deucalion’s wife isn’t with him, but he’s not alone; there’s a young black man with him, about Derek’s age. He looks familiar, but Stiles can’t place him.

Deucalion is carrying a large cardboard box with him, which he sets down just inside. “There’s six more for you, Stiles.”

Stiles forces himself to bite the bullet. “There’s, uh, there’s no rush, right? Because I still have three from the last batch.”

“No, no,” Deucalion says. “It just so happens that I was passing through, and after this I’ll be in Australia for three weeks, so I figured I would stop by while I had the chance.”

Stiles nods, relieved, and says, “Okay. I just, uh, I wanted to be sure.”

“Remember that I’m not sure of WLO involvement on any of these cases,” Deucalion cautions him. “Don’t spend over-long on them, if you don’t see anything.”


“Oh,” Deucalion nods a little. “That is a terrible one, isn’t it. I don’t expect you to solve it, you know. Detectives with ten times your experience have been trying to do so for years, and haven’t made any headway. Don’t be too hard on yourself if you don’t get anywhere with it.”

“That’s what my dad and Derek have both been telling me,” Stiles says, but he has to admit that he feels better hearing it from the guy who had given him the cases.

“Well, if you feel like it’s all for naught, I can probably cheer you up a bit,” Deucalion says. “I’m actually on my way home from San Francisco right now, but my young friend here might be a bit familiar to you.”

The young man with Deucalion extends his hands and says, “Uh, hi. Marc Simmons. I was, uh – “
“In prison!” Stiles says, forgetting his manners in his excitement. Marc Simmons was the man who had been falsely convicted of murdering his girlfriend. “So you got out? They cleared you?”

“In theory, Marc will be standing a new trial this summer,” Deucalion says, “but it won’t come to that, I’m sure. It gives us the time we need to verify a few more pieces of information that will prove someone else was the killer.”

“That’s awesome,” Stiles says.

“Well, Duke told me that you’re the one who cracked the case,” Marc says. “Man, I can’t even tell you how grateful I am. I mean, not just to get out of jail, but to find out who killed Kris – she was the love of my life, you know?”

Stiles turns pink and stammers something that he hopes is appropriate.

Talia intervenes, seeing how embarrassed he is. “Won’t you come in for a cup of coffee?” she asks, and Deucalion agrees, although he says they can’t stay long. They want to make it back to Portland, where Marc is from, before the end of the day. Deucalion is telling them about the case as they walk through the foyer and into the rest of the house, his cane tapping at the floor.

There’s a brief pause in the Monopoly game while Talia introduces the teenagers to Deucalion and Marc. She’s in the middle of a sentence about Stiles’ involvement in Marc’s release when Seth looks up and blurts out, “Dude, a blind werewolf? How’d that happen?”

It’s one of those moments where practically everyone starts talking at once. There’s none of that stunned silence this time. They’re all so sick of Seth’s bullshit that four people start laying down the law simultaneously. But none of them compare to what Deucalion does. He just calmly takes a knife off the kitchen counter and slams it point-down into the table between two of Seth’s fingers. That causes a dramatic silence. The four people talking immediately shut up. Deucalion just smiles and says, “Did I get it right this time? It’s always so bloody when I miss.”

“Jesus fuck,” Seth says faintly, and Stiles feels hysterical giggles rising in his throat.

“Duke, that table cost eight hundred dollars,” Talia says, and from the look on her face, she’s trying not to laugh as well.

“I’ll write you a check,” Deucalion tells her.

“That is mahogany!” Allison declares, and both Scott and Stiles just crack up.

“Um, we’re going to go . . . somewhere else,” Cora says brightly. “That is not here. Um.” She grabs Seth by the elbow and hauls him to his feet and then out of the room.

Deucalion shakes his head a little as they depart. “One in every pack, I suppose,” he says, and then goes back to the tale of Marc’s release from prison without missing a beat. They stay about another fifteen minutes, and Stiles presses a batch of cookies onto them before they go. He and Marc exchange e-mail addresses, and he gives Marc the address for the WLO-victim support group website.

“It was nice of him to bring Marc by,” Talia says, as Stiles is starting dinner.

“I think he knew . . . I needed the boost,” Stiles admits. “And some fresh cases might be good. A change of pace.”
Tom nods and tousles his hair. “Remember, you won’t be able to solve them all. A lot of them are cold cases for a reason.”

Stiles nods. “I know,” he says.

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Stiles looks up from the history homework he’s been struggling with when the front door opens. Typically, he can’t identify whoever’s entering just from the sound of their footsteps, but it’s different with Derek. He always knows when his mate has come home. “Hey, you’re home early,” he says, as Derek walks in, slightly less grubby than usual.

“I went in early this morning,” Derek says. He leans over Stiles to give him a kiss, but tries not to touch him otherwise, not wanting to spread any dirt that he might be wearing. Then he pastes on a smile and says, “Hey, Seth.”

“Yo, ‘sup?” Seth greets him, glancing up from his phone.

Stiles keeps from rolling his eyes at the last minute, then says, “Tyler got himself and his sister into a mud puddle, and Cora’s helping Laura give them a bath. Seth decided to stay down here and keep me company,” he adds, the underlying ‘Seth declined to make himself useful’ coming through loud and clear.

“Ah.” Derek clearly understands everything that Stiles isn’t saying. He moves to the sink and starts scrubbing down his hands and arms. Normally, he would go shower, but he figures that Stiles would appreciate actual company more than a cleaner Derek. After he’s cleaned up some, he moves back towards Stiles, and can’t help but reach out to touch him, rubbing a hand over his hair and down the back of his neck. “Is there anything I can eat?” he asks, the question respectful rather than with expectation.

Stiles is chewing on the end of his pencil, which is somewhat distracting. “Yeah, uhm, there’s leftover spaghetti or there’s some salami and cheese.” He sucks on the pencil, which is very distracting, although it’s clear he’s not doing it intentionally. “Don’t eat too much, though, ‘m making fajitas for dinner and there’s gonna be a ton.”

Seth chortled. “You sound like his mother. Don’t spoil your appetite!”

That’s enough to redirect Derek from Stiles’ oral fixation. “You know, even my mother, the alpha, doesn’t mock the denmaker in his own kitchen.” The smile he gives Seth isn’t technically hostile, but it’s close.

“You guys sure take that whole thing seriously,” Seth says, without an ounce of remorse. “I mean, for a glorified housekeeper.”

That’s enough to redirect Derek from Stiles’ oral fixation. “You know, even my mother, the alpha, doesn’t mock the denmaker in his own kitchen.” The smile he gives Seth isn’t technically hostile, but it’s close.

“Hey, the denmaker is the last line of defense, the hidden assassin. How hard would it be for me to poison somebody?”

Derek just blinks at Stiles for a few moments. He hadn’t known that Peter had gone over that with Stiles, but he guesses that he shouldn’t be surprised. He just switches his gaze to Seth, since Stiles seems to be defending himself adequately. Seth, however, is unfazed. “Awesome,” he says, going back to the game he’s playing on his phone. Stiles sighs and goes back to his schoolwork, so Derek
heads to the refrigerator. He has to admit that he had been hoping that they might be able to go out somewhere, but Stiles is clearly absorbed in his schoolwork, and he doesn’t want to interrupt. In fact, Stiles is starting to tap the table with his pencil, which is a sure sign that he’s having trouble with something.

“Mm?” Derek says, glancing over at him. It’s a nice compromise that he’s discovered. It gives Stiles the opportunity to blow him off if he chooses, but it’s enough of an opening that he can also ask for help or lay the issue out.

Stiles scrubs a hand through his hair. “What’s that word for when countries don’t get involved in foreign affairs?”

“Uh . . .” Derek rummages in the fridge. “Give me an example?”

“Like, it’s the policy when a country has decided ‘fuck the rest of the world, we’re staying inside our borders’.”

“Isolationism,” Derek says.

“Yes!” Stiles jots it down. “That’s it.”

“Like Japan used to be, right?” Derek says, pulling out a Tupperware full of leftover spaghetti.

“Yeah, and America between the first and second world war,” Stiles says, continuing to make notes. He glances up and says, “Sorry if you were hoping to come home and do, I don’t know, something more exciting than watch me forget history.”

Derek shrugs. “You didn’t forget history; you forgot the word for isolationism. And we can do something after dinner, or tomorrow.”

“Mm,” Stiles says, chewing on his pencil again. He scrubbed a hand through his hair again and mutters something that sounds like “Fucking Hoover and Coolidge and Woodrow, I get them all mixed up, how many presidents has this country even had and why do they all sound alike?”

“I’m kinda surprised you’re even in school,” Seth says, still thumbing at his phone.

“Why?” Stiles asks, scribbling at his notebook.

“I dunno, because of what happened when you got shot. Aren’t you retarded now or something?”

Stiles drops his pencil as his head snaps up. His mouth moves for a second, but then he just swallows and looks away.

The dish that Derek is holding slams down and he whips around to face Seth. “What did you just say to him?” he demands, and there’s nothing pleasant about his tone at all.

“Hey, relax, dude, that’s just what people say,” Seth says.

“No. It’s what you said,” Derek snarls, jabbing a finger at him to emphasize his point.

“All I’m saying is that – “

“Jesus, I can’t do this,” Stiles says. He pushes back from the table and leaves the kitchen without another word. A few moments later, the back door opens and shuts.

Derek tracks his movement, but once he’s gone, he turns back to Seth. “I don’t care what you’re
saying, because it’s obviously things that you aren’t smart enough to keep between your teeth. Even if you are stupid enough to think them.”

“Whatsoever, dude,” Seth says. He picks up his phone and goes back to his game. “Jesus.”

“No, not whatsoever.” Derek reaches out and takes the phone. “If you ever say anything like that to or about Stiles again, you’ll have a whole lot more than me to deal with.” Derek slams the phone down, but he’s careful not to break it. “Now get out of the kitchen. And don’t set foot in here again unless it’s a family meal or Stiles gives you permission.”

Seth snatches his phone and says, “I’ll go see where Cora’s at.”

“You go do that.” Derek is on his heels until he’s out of the room, thinking that if he’s going to go cry to Cora to take his side, he’s going to get a nasty shock. Then he turns and heads out the back door, looking for Stiles. He doesn’t see him anywhere, and for a few moments he’s worried that he’s actually left the property. But he still feels close, so Derek prowls around until he finds him leaning against the tool shed at the edge of the back yard, out of sight from the house. He glances up as Derek approaches, but looks away without saying anything. “I, uh, I threw him out of your kitchen. Pretty much for good,” Derek says, hoping he hasn’t overstepped, and clipped Stiles’ toes.

“Yeah, like he’ll pay attention to that any more than he pays attention to the rest of the pack etiquette we’ve tried to teach him,” Stiles remarks, drawing his knees up to his chest.

“He’ll pay attention because I’ll physically remove him. It isn’t open for negotiation unless you want it to be.” Derek sits down next to him.

“As much as I’d love to see that, I don’t know that it would help the overall situation,” Stiles mutters.

“True. I don’t think anything can make him less of an asshole, but he isn’t allowed to say insulting shit like that to you, and you have a right to feel safe in our house. Unfortunately, we can’t bar him from it completely, but we can ban him from the kitchen.” He pauses as he thinks about an unintentional side effect. “Which will really give all of us a sanctuary away from him.”

“Great,” Stiles says dryly. “It’s going to be three times as difficult to get anything done.” He shakes his head a little and anxiously pulls at the hem of his shirt. “Is that . . . is that what people really think about me?”

“No. At least, not anyone that I’ve seen.” Derek leans back against the shed wall. “Having some problems with your memory doesn’t make you retarded. It doesn’t diminish your intelligence.” Stiles laughs bitterly. “You know, it’s kinda funny, because when he said that, I wanted to reply with ‘fuck you too’ but I couldn’t remember the word ‘fuck’. It’s not like I use it fifteen times a day. My dad would be thrilled, really.”

Derek gives a snort. “I can see how it took you off guard, but don’t tell me that you need the word ‘fuck’ to insult someone.”

“No. I don’t. But I got stuck on it. That’s the problem. It’s not that I forget words, it’s that I get hung up on trying to remember the exact word I mean instead of just coming up with an alternative. That’s what makes me seem slow. That’s what makes me look ret – “

Derek reaches over and puts a finger over Stiles’ lips. “Don’t even say it. Because you aren’t. And I know it isn’t my job to give you pep talks, but Jesus, Stiles. You’ve got some issues because something really bad happened to you. Welcome to the family. Now you fit right in with your
boyfriend who freaks out when you grill pork, and your uncle who sometimes forgets where he is, and your alpha who was so desperate for a bigger pack that she nearly tore the one she had apart. And a whole lot of us who never want to see a lit birthday candle again.”

“I guess you’re right about that,” Stiles says, and he leans against Derek, relaxing slightly. “I just . . . I can’t even with that guy. I mean . . . knowing he thinks that about me. I just don’t want to even look at him. You won’t hold it against me if I avoid him, right?”

“Hell, no.” Derek wraps an arm around him. “I might be a little jealous that I can’t get away with it, though.”

“That’s totally fair,” Stiles says.

“You know,” Derek says, “I didn’t realize Peter had talked to you about the denmaker’s role as the last-ditch assassin.”

Stiles blinks at him. “I – what? That’s a real thing? I was just making shit up to freak Seth out!”

“Oh,” Derek says. “Well, that explains why you actually told him about it. I had been wondering.”

“Denmakers actually assassinate people?”

“It’s rare,” Derek says, “but yeah, it’s happened.”

“Damn,” Stiles says, shaking his head. “Werewolves are hard – “ He stops and shakes his head. “No, don’t tell me, I’ll get it. It’s that thing at the center.” He pauses, then heaves a sigh. “God, I can’t even look at my homework right now and I don’t have to start dinner for an hour. You came home early just for me and you still need a shower. Let’s go take one.”

“Now you’re talking.” Derek grins and stands up. “I also want you to know that what you were doing to that pencil earlier was obscene.”

“What? What was I doing to the pencil?” Stiles asks blankly, accepting Derek’s hand and letting the older man pull him to his feet.

“You kept twiddling it and sticking it in your mouth.”

“Oh, sorry.” Stiles laughs. “I have an oral fixation. I wonder why . . .” he muses, glancing downwards at Derek’s crotch significantly.

“Don’t give me, any of me, those looks until we’re in the shower.”

“Sir, yes sir,” Stiles says, with a smirk that does terrible things to Derek.

~ ~ ~

Things are tense in the Hale house for several days afterwards. Stiles won’t even look at Seth, and pretends that he doesn’t exist. Every time he even sees him, he hears that hateful r-word in his head and can’t help but wonder if that’s what other people think of him. The others clearly know he’s upset about something, but after a few gentle attempts yield no answers, they back off.

He avoids Cora, too, because he just can’t help it. All she wants to talk about is Seth, and he just
doesn’t want to hear it. He supposes he’ll get over that eventually, because he knows that this isn’t Cora’s fault. But at the same time, he’s bitter and angry that she brought Seth into the den, into this place that had become such a safe space for him.

School is thus problematic because he’s in three different classes with Cora, and he knows that she’ll start to notice the way he’s avoiding her before long. He’ll just have to keep trying to figure out what’s going on with Seth and get him out of the house before things get worse than they already are.

At least he can avoid Seth in the kitchen. Word quietly spreads among the pack that Seth has been banned, and so far Seth has been smart enough not to challenge Derek on this. That or he simply doesn’t care about being in it. Derek doesn’t know which and he doesn’t particularly care. It’s nice for both him and Stiles to have space away from him. At least Seth usually goes home after dinner, so he isn’t hanging around all the time. He has morning classes, and the Hale house is too far away from the college for him to stay the night there.

After that word spreads, Stiles finds he has a suspicious number of volunteers on his hands when it comes to meal preparation and clean-up. Laura’s always volunteering to do the dishes and Aaron chops and stirs things that don’t particularly need chopping or stirring. Stiles shakes his head at this and just tries to divvy out some chores so everyone can get a little Seth-free time.

His investigation has gone nowhere fast. The Hale pack’s enemies don’t have any connection to Seth and he can’t find any evidence that they’re up to anything, let alone this. And he still can’t figure out why Seth is acting the way he is. He thinks of a multitude of reasons – that Seth is a decoy, a smokescreen, or that he’s actually been instructed to target Stiles specifically, or that he’s in the house for some other purpose like the construction worker who had laced the walls with accelerant and doesn’t give a shit what the pack thinks of him. But nothing seems right, and he can’t nail down anything concrete.

Things take a sharp and extremely unexpected turn the following Sunday. Peter is home for the first time all week, eating bacon and waffles like he’s never been gone. Scott and Allison are sleepily canoodling over their breakfast. Talia and Tom are discussing a local case that she’s been working on, while Melissa occasionally chimes in. Seth is quieter than usual, probably because of Peter’s presence, so things are low-key.

Aaron gets a text alert halfway through the meal, fishes out his phone, and makes a surprised noise. Talia glances over at him and asks what’s going on. “Hang on,” he says, tapping on the screen of his phone. “Verifying . . .”

“There really shouldn’t be any verifying over breakfast,” Talia remarks.

“You’ll want to hear this,” Aaron says. He taps for another moment, then looks over at her and says, “Apparently Gerard Argent was found dead last night.”

Stiles looks up. “Is ‘hallelujah’ the wrong response here?”

“Stiles,” Tom says, giving him a reproving look.


“That’s Allison’s grandfather,” Tom reminds him.

“I hadn’t seen him since I was three,” Allison says. “He and my dad didn’t exactly have a rosy relationship.”
Tom sighs and gives up. He looks at Aaron and says, “He had terminal cancer, so I presume it was probably natural causes?”

“Well, the article says that foul play ‘hasn’t been ruled out’,” Aaron says, “and if they’re thinking about ruling it in, then it can’t be as simple as it looks.”

“Hunh,” Tom says, and frowns a little. Stiles suspects that he’s going to be doing a little investigation as soon as breakfast is over. He can’t help but want to do a little of his own. He can’t help but be suspicious of the fact that twelve hours after Gerard Argent died under mysterious circumstances, Peter finally made an appearance and is sitting there cheerfully demolishing a plate of eggs.

“Peter?” he says, when no one else seems curious. “Anything you want to tell us?”

“Yes, I killed him,” Peter says complacently.

Tom’s fork hits the table with a thunk. “Seriously? Officer of the law, sitting right here.”

Peter looks up and smirks. “I’m sorry, Tom, I couldn’t resist.” To Stiles, he says, “The man had terminal cancer. Why would I waste my time and effort to kill someone who was already dying? I’m not an impatient man. It’s quite likely Gerard’s death was a murder, but whoever committed it was not me.”

“And you just happen to be back in town finally because . . .?”

“I would never miss Sunday brunch cooked by my nephew’s adorable denmaking mate,” Peter replies.

Stiles groans. “Okay. I give up. Just gonna put that in the fuck-it bucket.”

“Swear jar,” his father says.

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Chapter End Notes

Trigger warning for use of the word ‘retarded’, specifically meant in a derogatory fashion.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I did put it in the tags, but I just want to reiterate real quick that child abuse will definitely be present in this story, so please keep that in mind and take care of yourselves. <3

Also part of the scene with Isaac in this is literally stolen right from the canon, because hey, why not?

Isaac eases the back door of the house open, peering right and left before ducking inside. He’s hoping against hope that his father has already left for the cemetery. He works late a lot of the time. The gravedigging is done at night, so the plots are ready in the morning. If it’s a Friday or a Saturday night, his father makes him do it, but on weeknights he does it himself.

Unfortunately for Isaac, as soon as he gets into the house, he hears his father in the kitchen, and winces. “Hey, uh, hey Dad,” he says, ducking his head a little as he moves into the kitchen. He hadn’t meant to be out so late. Stiles had invited him out for pizza and a game or two of pick-up lacrosse. It had been fun, and he had lost track of time.

He still isn’t sure how he feels about Stiles. He has a strong feeling that Stiles has ulterior motives for befriending him, that likely have something to do with his pack. He just has no idea what those motives are. He still can’t forget his first meeting with Cora, all ninety seconds of it. She had given him this uncertain smile and said, ‘hey, what are you doing all by yourself?’ and he had forgotten how to talk for a minute. He can still see her smile every night while he’s trying to sleep, see the way she nervously chewed on her lower lip while she spoke with him.

He can still see the way her face fell when he finally blurted out, “Uh, I really can’t,” in response to her tentative ‘do you want to go hang out somewhere quieter’. She had looked momentarily crushed. He had tried to save the situation by further stammering, “It’s not, uh, it’s not you, it’s just, I can’t really do the whole mate thing” and that had only made things worse.

He can still see her face as she left the gymnasium full of werewolves and potential mates. He had lost track of her for a while, gone to hide in the restroom until he had hoped she was gone. But she wasn’t gone when he came out. She was just leaving, on the arm of a guy a few inches taller, wearing a baseball cap, as she gazed up at him in adoration. It had lodged in Isaac’s gut like a knife. He had told himself not to think about it. It’s not the same for every werewolf, right? So her asking him out didn’t necessarily mean that he was ‘the one’. She had probably just thought he was cute, which was at least a self-esteem booster, and when he turned her down, gone on to other pastures. He would just move on with his life.

Then Stiles had turned up, and Isaac is no longer sure about anything. Why is Stiles interested in him? What does it have to do with his pack-sister? Because Isaac isn’t stupid enough to think it’s not related. It can’t be a coincidence that the three times he’s hung out with Stiles and his pack, Cora hasn’t been in attendance.
And does it even matter? Regardless of whatever’s going on with Stiles and his pack, Roger Lahey has made his opinion on the matter very clear. People who go after werewolves are leeches. Give him a hard-working, red-blooded man any day of the week over one of those furry upstarts. (Of course, on a different day his father will come up with reasons to hate those men, too. His father doesn’t hate werewolves; his father hates everybody, and he hates Isaac most of all.)

“Where have you been?” Roger asks, in that mild tone that Isaac hates, that means his father has gone past anger and is already determining his punishment.

“Sorry, dad, I was studying with some friends and I lost track of time,” Isaac says. It had been fun, hanging out with Stiles and his friends. Derek had been there this time. He had given Isaac this measuring sort of look, but hadn’t said much. He seems quiet, particularly in comparison to Stiles and Scott’s excitable chatter. Scott and Isaac versus Derek and Stiles, so each team had one wolf and one human, had been pretty fair. Derek’s not really experienced with lacrosse, but he’s better with his werewolf powers than Scott, so it had evened out. They had played until he had suddenly realized it was getting too dark to see.

Roger continues to calmly wash the dishes. “You know, I don’t ask much of you, Isaac;” he says. “House clean, homework done, dinner on the table when I get home from working all day.” The glass he’s holding hits the counter with a clink. “Are you hungry?”

“Oh, no,” Isaac says, hoping that’s the right answer.

It isn’t. His father says, “I made hamburgers. There’s two for you left in the oven. Why don’t you have some dinner.”

“Yes, sir,” Isaac says, ducking his head and going for the food. “I can clean up, you don’t need to –”

“What did I just tell you to do, Isaac?” Roger says.

Isaac hurriedly goes for the food. “Yes, sir. Sorry.” He sits down with his plate. Two hamburgers and a helping of fried potatoes. His father’s not much of a cook, but Isaac’s hardly a gourmet sort of person. There’s nothing green on the plate. He starts shoveling the food in his mouth, his back tense, watching as his father does the dishes.

“So,” Roger says, “what were you studying with these friends of yours?”

“Oh, just uh,” Isaac says, “we have a paper on the Grapes of Wrath due next week, we were talking about the book and stuff. And there’s a math test on Friday.”

“Uh huh,” Roger says, going for a towel and drying off his hands. He sits down across the table from Isaac. “How’d you do on that chemistry lab you got back Monday?”

Isaac holds back a wince. He had been hoping his father had forgotten about that. “I got, uh, I got a seventy-nine on it.”

“What’s that bring your class average to?”

“I’m not sure,” Isaac says, squirming. “Uh, midterms are in a couple weeks so it could go up.”

“Well, what’s it at now?”

“The grade? I, uh, I’m not sure.”
“But you just said it could go up.”

“Well, I just mean, generally.”

“You wanna take this conversation downstairs?” Roger asks, and Isaac can’t hold back a little shudder. “No? Then tell me your grade.”

“Dad, the semester’s not even halfway over – ”

“Isaac.”

“There’s plenty of time.”

“Isaac . . .”

“It’s a D,” Isaac blurs out. Stupid chemistry. Stupid Harris taking points off because he doesn’t like Isaac’s handwriting or because he made the dumb mistake of once correcting a word that Harris had used wrong. Stupid him for not being good enough, not being as good as Camden. Stupid Camden for dying and leaving him alone.

“A D.” Roger sits back in his chair and regards Isaac for a few moments that feel more like an eternity. “All right. I’m not angry, you know. Maybe a little disappointed.”

That’s a given, Isaac thinks. A day has never passed where his father hasn’t been disappointed in him.

“You know I’m gonna have to punish you, though,” his father continues, and Isaac nods and keeps his gaze locked on the table and desperately thinks not the freezer, not the freezer, please God not the freezer. “You know, I have my responsibility as a parent. So, tell you what, I already did the dishes, but why don’t you clean up the kitchen.”

Isaac nods, but he’s on edge, like an animal scenting danger. His father is being too calm, too reasonable, and that’s never a good thing. He would always rather his father just lose his temper and start screaming. At least then it’s over with more quickly. He just keeps nodding while his father talks about how spotless it’s going to be, keeps nodding and tries not to flinch while his father throws glasses and smashes crockery, keeps nodding and thinks it’s just a chemistry grade, please, for the love of God, please don’t put me in there again.

“Well,” his father says, taking a deep breath and looking around the kitchen and the gigantic mess he’s made. “Spotless. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Isaac says.

The ironic thing about it, he thinks, as he starts picking up the larger pieces of broken glass, is that now he’s almost certainly going to fail his chemistry quiz tomorrow, because he won’t have time to study. He decides to cross that bridge – or more likely jump off of it – when he comes to it. He’s just glad that his father is leaving the house, heading down to the cemetery to do some of the night’s work.

The door closes behind him, leaving the house empty and silent. Isaac hisses in pain as he cuts his hand on a sliver of glass he hadn’t seen at first. He sticks it in his mouth and sucks on the cut until the pain fades to a dull throbbing.

He sits in the kitchen feeling lonely and upset and a little bit scared, and wonders why he’s suddenly thinking about calling Stiles.
Details about Gerard’s death trickle in slowly. Most of them aren’t made public, and come in through Tom’s connections in law enforcement and Aaron’s in the press. Apparently foul play is a definite, even though the newspapers hadn’t reported that at first. The scene is quite strange, although nobody wants to admit that. Gerard was found crumpled on his living room floor with black goo leaking from almost every orifice. There’s a wound on his arm that looks like a bite.

Talia stirs her coffee while Aaron tells her about this after dinner. She’s obviously troubled by it, and Stiles gives Derek a questioning look. The kitchen is otherwise empty. Laura and Jonathan are putting the kids to bed. Seth and Cora departed for ‘alone time’ almost an hour previous, and the Mc Calls and Allison have gone home for the night. Peter has been wandering in and out. “What does that mean?” he asks.

“It . . . sounds like a bite rejection,” Derek says, brow furrowing in confusion.

“Like a werewolf bite?” Stiles asks, nearly dropping his cutting board.

Talia looks over, sees there will be no deterring him, and sighs. “Yes, that’s what it sounds like,” she says. “Most of the time, the bite takes. There’s only about a two percent risk of a rejection, and most people are willing to risk it. Better research has found a way to halt the rejection and save the person’s life, although they can have long-term health problems afterwards, depending on how long it takes them to get medical care.”

“Why in the hell would a werewolf have bitten the head of the WLO?” Stiles asks, baffled. “I mean, he’s not exactly the kind of guy who would ask for it.”

“Maybe he would,” Derek says. “Gerard was dying of terminal cancer. The bite could have saved his life.”

“Yeah, but . . . guys like that are usually all ‘give me liberty or give me death’. They don’t bend in their principles.”

“It’s pretty easy to say ‘give me death’ when you’re not actually looking it in the face,” Aaron remarks dryly. “I do agree with you, Stiles, but there are circumstances under which I can see it happening. But while I can see Gerard wanting the bite, I can’t fathom of an alpha who would actually give it to him.”

Stiles chews on his lower lip while he starts chopping carrots. “Can you . . . force a rejection?”

Talia looks up. “Yes, it would be possible,” she says. “If the person had ingested something like mistletoe or mountain ash beforehand, their body would almost certainly reject the bite.”

“Seems like an awfully roundabout way to kill somebody,” Aaron says, frowning.

“And almost impossible to prove, too,” Talia says. “It wouldn’t be quick, either. It would be a slow, painful death. So I could see why somebody would go for it. But at the same time, Gerard wouldn’t just lie there and die. He could have called for help. So if he didn’t, it seems likely that someone actively prevented him from doing so.”

“But hey, this is good, right?” Stiles asks. “I mean, it dramatically limits the suspect pool. Whoever
killed him has to have been an alpha.”

“Not necessarily,” Peter says, coming in from the dining room. “The person who bit him and the person who gave him the mountain ash and/or mistletoe are not necessarily one and the same. If someone knew he was planning to get the bite, was . . . offended by it, by a murderer and persecutor of werewolves trying to become one . . . they could have dosed him in the days coming up to the planned bite. God knows it would have been easy enough; he was on a dozen different medications.”

“It wouldn’t even necessarily have to have been another werewolf,” Aaron remarks. “I can easily see a former WLO member becoming incensed by their leader’s supposed betrayal, and planning to put a stop to it.”

“So we’re back to square one,” Stiles says, and sighs. It’s getting to be a familiar place.

Peter gives him a friendly whap upside the head. “You are back to nowhere,” he says. “Gerard’s death is a matter for the police. Not for us. You have things to do that are far more deserving of your time.”

“I guess that’s true,” Stiles says, somewhat begrudgingly. He doesn’t like being told to stop trying to solve a mystery, but God knows there’s enough on his plate right now. He finishes with the carrots and moves on to the celery sticks. He still thinks that Peter knows something about Gerard’s death that he’s not saying, but it’s becoming very obvious that Peter doesn’t plan on telling him anything about it.

On the upside, if Peter’s done with whatever the fuck he was doing with Gerard and the WLO, it’s possible that he’ll have time to help Stiles with the investigation into Seth. Which is why it’s so frustrating that when he finishes up with his food preparation for the coming week, Peter is nowhere to be found.

Cora comes home about an hour later, without Seth. She seems lackluster and apathetic, which makes Derek fuss over her. Stiles has noted quietly that Cora comes home from evenings with Seth in one of two states: this listless indifference, or giggly and borderline defiant. He isn’t sure what to make of it at all. He wonders if Seth is drugging her. He needs to get into the man’s apartment, and he isn’t sure how or when he’ll have a chance to do that.

Derek decides to sit down and watch some television with her in an effort to revive her. Stiles tells him that he’s going to go work on his WLO cases in their room, but doesn’t. Instead, he boots up his laptop and looks up the GPS of Peter’s phone. (The password is one of those ridiculously uncrackable ones with capital and lowercase letters and symbols. It’s too bad that Peter forgets it frequently enough that he gave it to Talia, who left it in her desk.)

He finds Peter at the site of the fire, sitting underneath the Memorial Tree that had been planted there. He’s running his fingers over the plaque, and looks up as Stiles approaches. A faint frown touches his face. “I suppose this is probably the first place you looked for me,” he says.

Stiles doesn’t tell him about the phone and the GPS because he might need to use it again on another day. “You’re avoiding me and it’s really fucking annoying,” he snaps. “I need to talk to you about Seth.”

Peter stares at him blankly for a long minute, and Stiles wonders if maybe this wasn’t the best idea. Peter’s more stable now, and they’re close enough that it becomes easy to forget what Peter is capable of. His eyes gleam momentarily blue in the darkness. He seems aware of what Stiles is thinking, because he says, “Stiles. I only come here to engage in quiet contemplation over the loss
of my mate. Now is not a good time.”

For a minute, Stiles almost turns and walks away. But then he growls in frustration. “Cora is home on the sofa, crying, while Derek makes her watch fucking Friendship is Magic because he doesn’t know how else to handle this. I’m not getting any God damned closer to solving it on my own and I need your help!”

There’s a long silence. Then Peter gets to his feet. “Walk with me,” he says. “I can’t . . . think here.”

Stiles does. They walk in silence, deep into the preserve, for almost five minutes.

“I’m worried that he’s drugging her,” Stiles finally says.

Peter nods a little. “A valid concern. Her behavior has been erratic of late. It would certainly be easy enough for him to do it, since they often go out together unsupervised.”

“Look, I don’t . . . I don’t know how this whole Left Hand thing works,” Stiles says. “Aren’t we sure enough now that we can just . . . ask Seth? Under, uh, duress?”

“Are you asking me to torture him?” Peter responds.

Stiles winces but holds his ground. “Yes. Yes, for fuck’s sake, I’m asking you to torture him for information. I can’t – I can’t fucking watch Cora like this anymore. So don’t say that all high and mighty like you wouldn’t do it, or like you’re insulted that I know you would.”

Peter lets out a breath. “When it comes to my pack, there’s very little that I’m not capable of,” he says, “and you would do well to remember that.”

“For fuck’s sake, Peter,” Stiles snaps. “You murdered Kate Argent right in front of me. I’m fucking aware.”

“Fair enough,” Peter says. “So I will explain to you why I am not torturing Seth for information. There are four possible explanations for what is happening here. The first is that Seth is Cora’s mate and we’re all overreacting due to our own traumatic experiences. I haven’t discounted that completely, but it’s irrelevant to the conversation so we’ll put that aside for now. The second. Seth is not Cora’s mate, and he is drugging, magically inducing, hypnotizing, or otherwise coercing her to believe that he is.”

“And that’s the possibility we’ve been operating under,” Stiles says.

“Yes. And it’s the possibility wherein torturing him might actually gain us something,” Peter says. “But there are other options. The third is that they have used some sort of magic spell to actually make Seth into Cora’s mate. Wherein we will still have to remove him, but we will need to be very, very careful about how it’s done.”

Stiles chews on his lower lip. “And four?”

“Four is the one that troubles me the most. Seth is honestly Cora’s mate, but there is magic on him – or blackmail, or other influence – forcing him to behave as he would otherwise not. In which case torture would most likely gain us nothing, and would harm a member of our pack.”

“I don’t think that’s likely,” Stiles says, “because of Isaac.” He sees Peter’s blank look and says, “Yeah, if you’d been around, I would have told you about Isaac. Curly-hair, orange-bracelet.”
“Oh, yes. You mentioned him to me. You’ve found him?”

“Yeah. And I think he’s supposed to be her mate.”

“All right. I’ll accept your conclusion. But unfortunately, that doesn’t completely rule out option four, and it doesn’t change option three at all.” Peter shakes his head. “We need more information. Moving too fast will only tip off Seth’s handlers that we know something’s wrong. I don’t like letting Cora suffer any more than you do. We’ll move as quickly as we can – and no quicker.”

Stiles sighs. “Okay,” he says. “I want to get into Seth’s apartment. Any ideas?”

“Steal his keys,” Peter says with a shrug.

“But I’m always here when he’s here. I’m the fucking denmaker. My absence will be noticed.”

Peter nods. “Let me think about it. Now that Gerard is dead and . . . certain other members of the WLO have left the country rather hastily after I spoke with them . . . I should be able to be of more assistance to you.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Derek is taking his turn doing dish duty when Cora wanders in from having bid Seth good night to help out. She’s a little quiet while she sorts out the dirty silverware to put it in the dishwasher. The rest of the family has gone about their business, but she still seems nervous and ill-at-ease. “Hey,” she finally says, tucking her hair behind her ear, “can we talk? Like . . . privately?”

“Sure,” Derek says, without hesitation. He finishes with the dish that he’s holding and washes his hands, then gestures for her to lead the way. In a house full of werewolves, ‘privately’ usually means ‘in a soundproofed bedroom’.

But instead of heading upstairs, Cora goes out the back door. It’s chilly, but not unbearably cold, and she seems restless, like she needs to move. She crams her hands down into her pockets and starts walking. For a long minute, she doesn’t say anything, and Derek just keeps pace with her. “I think Stiles is avoiding Seth,” she finally says. “And I’m not sure if I should say something.”

Derek does the same with his hands. “That depends on which of them you want to say something to, and what you want to say.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I know Seth hasn’t won himself a lot of fans, but I just . . . I asked him if he could go get me a soda and he said he wasn’t allowed in the kitchen anymore? And I mean, I know Stiles is the denmaker and he has the right, especially given the way Seth is always trying to steal Uncle Peter’s pastrami, but doesn’t that seem a bit . . . much? To ban him from the kitchen entirely?”

“I’m the one who did that,” Derek says, partly because he doesn’t want her mad at Stiles, and partly because he wants her to understand how serious he thought the offense was. “And it wasn’t about the pastrami. He said some . . . really awful things to Stiles, and when I called him on it, he tried to pretend it wasn’t a big deal.”

Cora frowns a little. “What the hell did he say to get you so pissed off?”
Derek sighs. He hadn’t intended to lay this out for his sister, who was clearly having enough trouble, but he wasn’t about to lie or refuse to answer her question. “That he was surprised Stiles was even still in school because he’d been shot and now he was retarded.” It took effort to get the word out evenly, although he’s rewarded by Cora’s jaw dropping open. “And that it’s just ‘what everyone says’. Which we both know isn’t true, so he was just trying to cover his ass.”

Cora pushes both her hands through her hair and half-turns like she’s trying to escape the conversation. “Oh my God. Oh my God. I can’t – what – oh my God, Derek, does Stiles hate me? He hates me, doesn’t he. I’d hate me –

Derek turns to stand in front of her and puts his hands on her shoulders. “He doesn’t hate you,” he says firmly. “Really. He doesn’t.”

“Oh. I think.” Cora groans and lets her forehead thump against her brother’s chest. “I can’t believe he said that. I can’t believe you didn’t kill him!”

“I didn’t because I don’t hate you either,” Derek says, wrapping his arms around his little sister. “I don’t want you hurt.”

“I just don’t know what to do!” Cora says, letting him hold her for a minute but then pulling free so she can continue to pace. “It’s not like I haven’t talked to him about this stuff. I totally have! And he’s always really – he seems so understanding about it when we talk and he apologizes but then – we come back here the next day and he’s still –” Her voice breaks as she struggles to find the words for what she means.

“An asshole?” Derek asks, offering up the word without much thought, because he’s so used to offering up the words that Stiles has lost.

“Yes!” Cora says. “He’s such an asshole! I don’t know – this doesn’t even make any sense! He’s such an asshole but – but the thought of him not being there anymore –” Her voice breaks, and she sounds close to tears. “God, why did it have to be someone like him?”

“I don’t know.” It’s all Derek can think of to say, because really, it doesn’t make any sense.

“It’s like – after you met Stiles, I was so excited, because Stiles was so – he was someone the pack really needed in addition to being someone who was perfect for you. And I got to watch Laura find Jonathan and I thought – there had to be someone out there for me like that.” Cora wipes her eyes impatiently. “And then I saw Seth and I felt – it felt so amazing and wonderful and I was so happy, but it’s just, it’s all gone wrong and I don’t know why this is happening.”

Derek takes a deep breath and finally just asks the real question. “Are you sure he’s the right one?”

“God, yes,” Cora says. “I mean, as sure as I can be about something I’ve never felt before, but I’ve heard it described and I just . . . and the thought of having to go without him makes me go all cold and quivery. I don’t think I could handle it if I lost him.”

It’s not really the answer Derek wants to hear, but he can’t fault her for it. Now for the even tougher question. “Are you sure he feels the same way?”

Cora blinks, startled past being emotional. “Isn’t – isn’t it always? It can’t be one-sided, can it?”

Derek doesn’t know the answer. It shouldn’t be, that’s for sure. If it is one-sided, then something is very, very wrong. Strangely, that would be a relief. An answer. “I don’t know. It’s just that . . . he makes you so unhappy and he doesn’t seem to care.”
“But he says all the same things. I mean, about how he wants to be with me, how awesome we are together, how . . . how we were meant to be together.”

Derek stands there with her for a minute, desperately trying to think of a way to ask if she was sure, if she’s listened to his heartbeat, checked his scent for the nerves they can sometimes detect, but he just doesn’t know how.

“I’m sorry,” Cora finally says. “I’m being a crybaby, I guess. So my mate isn’t perfect. I guess that’s okay.”

That gets her a set of judgmental eyebrows. “Cora, do you remember what a mess I was? You’re hardly a crybaby. Come here.” He pulls her into another hug.

She sniffles a little and lets him hold her. “I guess I should go apologize to Stiles,” she says.

“No. Seth should apologize to Stiles. But not until he means it.” He rubs her back, thinking that he might decide to ask Seth some pointed questions and see how truthful the answers are.

“Okay. I think. I’ll finish the dishes, though?” It’s clearly meant as a peace offering.

Derek understands that, but he isn’t about to start blaming or punishing her for Seth’s behavior. “How about we finish them together?”

Cora lets out a breath. “How about I finish them tonight so I can take my aggression out on the roaster, and you can take my next turn?”

That gets a chuckle out of Derek. “If you really need to, you can take the roaster out back and beat it. We can get another one.”

“Okay.” Cora gives him a wan smile. “Thanks,” she adds, and then turns and trots back towards the house without another word. Derek follows her more slowly, deep in thought. Everything about this just seems so wrong, and he has no idea what questions he should even be asking, let alone what the answers would be. Was it possible for a werewolf to be tricked into choosing the wrong mate? Was it even conceivable that his sweet, feisty little sister would be fated to be paired up with someone as undeniably awful as Seth? Was he starting to see shadows and puppet strings everywhere, like Stiles had complained about doing?

He’s so intent on his contemplation that he’s startled to hear another heartbeat, smell the scent of pack. When he looks up, Peter is between him and the doorway. His uncle just lifts one hand and presses a finger against his lips to tell Derek to keep his mouth shut. Then he turns and walks away.

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Derek’s eyebrows climb as if to say ‘really, Uncle Peter?’ But he sighs and turns, following the other man. Peter walks for several minutes without saying a word or even acknowledging that his nephew was with him. His path meanders through the preserve until they’re well out of earshot or even scent range.

“Your sister is troubled,” Peter finally says.

“You think?” Derek retorts.

Peter gives him a blank look in the dim light. “Did you know,” he says, “that Seth Freudenberg is exactly as he appears to be?”

“Yes. Or at least that he checks out. He looks like an asshole and he is an asshole. What you see is what you get.” Derek is obviously tense. “What I don’t get is why he’s with Cora.”

“Mm,” Peter says. “No. You don’t understand. He is exactly as he appears to be. And who among us is? Who doesn’t have at least one secret, one skeleton in the closet, one episode best left unspoken of?”

“So what, he’s a fake?” Derek asks, frustrated.

“I don’t know,” Peter says. “And I truly abhor not knowing.”

“Well, what do you think?”

Peter is quiet for a long minute. “Do you know what kudzu is?” he asks.

Derek frowns. “Of course,” he says, wondering what that has to do with anything.

“Kudzu grows so fast that it engulfs entire bushes and trees and kills them.” Peter takes his wedding ring off, turning it around in his fingers. “That’s how invasive it is. Seth is a weed. A noxious, persistent weed. And the strife he spreads threatens to engulf the entire pack.”

Derek watches him fiddle with the ring. “So how do we get rid of it without hurting Cora?”

“Well, that’s an excellent question,” Peter says, “but a better one would be, why would getting rid of it hurt Cora?”

“Because he’s her mate. However it happened.” Derek shakes his head. “But I’m not really sure she’s his. He doesn’t care about her. At least not that I can see.”

Peter gives Derek that disappointed look. “Facts,” he says. “Deal with the facts, Derek. It is impossible for a bond to go one way. If Cora feels it, so does Seth. Since Seth does not feel it, we
can conclude it does not exist, can we not?"

Derek takes a moment to reflect on what a terrible Left Hand he would make. He just isn’t mentally complicated enough, doesn’t think around corners the same way. “Okay. So how is he, or whoever’s behind him because I’m really not going to give him that many points for brains, convincing Cora that there is a bond?”

“Well,” Peter says, sliding his ring back onto his finger, “that’s the million dollar question, isn’t it.”

Derek just throws his hands up in defeat.

“Did you expect me to have all the answers?” Peter says. “I just figured you would appreciate knowing that your concerns are well-founded, and are going to be addressed appropriately.”

“I do appreciate it. But do you practice being enigmatic?”

“Twice a day. Always before breakfast.”

Derek growls at him. “There has to be something we can do. We can’t just let him keep hurting Cora.”

“No,” Peter says, “but as you said, he’s the puppet. We need the puppet master. And until we find them, we’ll have to continue to tolerate Seth’s presence as best we can.”

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Everything regarding Seth and Gerard Argent and the WLO cases has to be put on hold on Wednesday, because Stiles had already made plans with Isaac and he isn’t about to break them. Isaac reminds him of a kicked puppy so much of the time, he would hate to do that. He’s very invested on keeping Isaac close, for when Cora finally comes around.

He’s kind of dreading the day that Isaac figures that out. He hopes that the other teenager isn’t angry at him for his ulterior motives. True, Isaac will benefit from them as well as Cora, but nobody likes a liar. There isn’t much he can do about it, though, so Stiles just tries not to worry about it.

Stiles has done his research on Isaac, too. He wasn’t about to let anything go unchecked, despite the fact that his instincts say that Isaac is a good guy. He wants to be sure. His father, Roger Lahey, owns one of Beacon Hills’ three cemeteries. It does fair-to-middling business. He doesn’t seem to have any connections to the WLO or any other anti-werewolf organization. Actually he doesn’t seem to have many ties to anything. He’s a loner, like his son.

Isaac’s mother died when he was young, and his older brother died in Iraq several years previous. After that happened, Lahey quit his part-time job coaching at the high school and has devoted his efforts to the cemetery business. A morbid profession for a man who’s had a morbid life, Stiles thinks. From all accounts, Lahey’s kind of an asshole.

Isaac himself seems almost like a ghost, the kind of teenager that drifts through school without being noticed. Danny asked around for Stiles and came up with virtually nothing. Isaac is the invisible kind of loner. He keeps his head down, stays quiet, keeps his nose clean. It’s a smart way
for an unpopular kid to play the few cards he has.

Stiles assumes he joined lacrosse in an effort to get his father’s attention. His grades are certainly nothing to write home about; he has a straight C average, his good English grade making up for his abysmal one in chemistry. Stiles gave that grade the side-eye pretty hard. He knows Harris’ tendency to penalize students for, well, existing. He thinks he’ll maybe look into it later, when he has more time.

Wednesday is leftover day, so it’s a good time for him to make plans. He rushes through his homework. That’s typical for him these days. His grades are dropping, and he’s hoping that nobody notices. He knows that his father is going to be upset with him. He had promised that he wouldn’t let things get too bad. But then, his father had been talking about his neurological troubles, not his pack troubles, Stiles rationalizes. It’s not the same thing.

Derek has settled a little, which relieves Stiles an infinite amount. He hates being evasive with Derek, but his mate has momentarily stopped asking questions. Stiles thinks Peter had talked to him, at least briefly. Derek will trust Peter to make sure that whatever needs to be done gets done. He probably assumes that Stiles doesn’t know anything more than he does, and Stiles doesn’t disillusion him, as much as he would like to.

Isaac’s never had much of a social life, so Stiles is relieved that he’s perfectly happy doing the same dorky things that they always do. On this particular Wednesday, they’ve just gathered at Scott’s house to marathon some Twilight Zone episodes. Isaac is just as geeky as the rest of them, it turns out, so that works out well.

Allison is a little bummed because she’s the only girl in their group now, and she misses Cora. They all miss Cora, but Stiles tries to keep the topic away from her while Isaac is there. Nobody’s forbidden to mention her, but it’s depressing, really, so it’s easy to change the subject when she comes up.

When Isaac shows up at about quarter past five, he’s hunched over with his hands in his pockets. Stiles wishes he would stand up straight more often. The way he slouches can make Stiles’ spine wince in sympathy. He had said he would bring some soda, but shows up empty-handed. Stiles doesn’t say anything about it.

As he moves in to the front hall and greets Derek with his usual shy reserve, Stiles catches a glimpse of a bruise disappearing underneath his sleeve. He frowns but decides it would be mean to call Isaac out on it in front of everyone else. He had already offered to drive Isaac back to his place when they’re done for the night, so he can ask about it then.

It’s a fun evening. He honestly enjoys Isaac’s company. When he comes out of his shell, he’s got a dry sense of deadpan humor that’s actually fairly hilarious. They have a lot of similar interests and a surprising number of similar experiences. He knows that Isaac lost his mother when he was young, and Stiles knows how lonely that can make you feel.

Isaac needs a pack, and if it were within Stiles’ power, he would already have one.

Given that Scott and Allison have no idea why Isaac is suddenly being inducted into their circle of friends, they seem a little curious about him. After the last episode, when they’re all just flopped in various positions in Scott’s living room, Scott and Isaac are talking about lacrosse. “So was it, like, weird?” Isaac asks him. “Becoming a werewolf?”

“It was so weird,” Scott says. “I mean, it just . . . changes you. You can hear and smell things you couldn’t before, like, people have this specific scent that’s different for every one of them. I had to
eat about twice as much for the first two months because my body was just packing on all this muscle mass? And part of me was like ‘what the hell am I going to do with biceps’, like, I wasn’t working out or anything but the muscles were there anyway.”

“You had muscles before,” Allison says, laughing and squeezing his arm.

“Yeah, but not like these,” Scott says. “And it’s other stuff, too. Like, you want to be closer to your pack. Personal space is a completely different concept. And around the full moon, it’s not just like you’re angry, like Hulk-angry, it’s just that everything is intensified. I had so much energy, it was nuts. If I got even the tiniest bit angry about something, it turned into rage. If something was funny, I would laugh like an idiot for ten minutes.”

“Doesn’t sound like much fun,” Isaac says, picking at a loose thread on his shirt.

“No, man, but I wouldn’t go back,” Scott says. “You get used to it. It’s like, after a while it’s just who you are, and you learn to control it. I love being a werewolf.”

Isaac glances over at Stiles and says nervously, “So . . . why aren’t you one? Don’t you want to be?”

Stiles shrugs. “Not really. I mean, I don’t have a reason to want to be one, the way Scott did, with his asthma.”

“Well . . . would it fix your, you know . . . problems?”

Isaac brings it up so hesitantly that Stiles can’t get annoyed at him. And at least he’s trying to be tactful, so he answers honestly. “Talia says that the Bite heals wounds, not scars. If they had given me the bite within the first forty-eight hours after my injury, I probably wouldn’t have the brain damage I do now. But I was soaked full of wolfsbane and it wouldn’t have been possible. With that much exposure to wolfsbane, it’s possible that even now, the Bite could kill me. Even if it didn’t, it’s too late for it to do any good.” He shrugs and says, “But I didn’t want to be a werewolf, and I’d be a piss-poor beta if we’re gonna be honest, so I’m okay with that. What about you? Would you want to be a werewolf?”

Isaac thinks about it for a minute, then ducks his head. “Yeah, maybe. It would be nice to be . . . stronger.”

“Well, you don’t have to be a werewolf for that!” Allison says. “You should come learn self-defense from Laura like Stiles and I do.”

Stiles glances over at her, a little surprised, but he shouldn’t be. Allison had been thrilled when Laura had invited her to the sessions. She had experienced enough violence in her short life, thanks to her family’s anti-werewolf activism, that she wanted to be able to take care of herself. Of course, inviting Isaac to their sessions might be complicated, given everything that’s going on. But he won’t take the invitation back.

“Yeah, maybe . . . maybe over the summer,” Isaac says. “I don’t think I would have time right now.”

“Sure,” Stiles says. “She’s actually a really good teacher. I mean, when she first started with me, I was like an awkward, flailing turtle. It was pretty horrifying. But now I actually know what I’m doing. And I fall over less. You know.”

“A goal we can all strive for,” Scott says, and Stiles laughs and punches him in the arm.
About an hour later, they leave for their respective houses. Stiles and Derek are dropping Isaac off on the way home. Stiles says, “Look, Isaac, I don’t want to pry, so if you tell me to go to hell, I will understand one hundred percent. But, you know, from the way you were talking about wanting to be strong . . . are you okay? I saw some bruises on your arm.”

He can feel, more than see, Derek go tense in the driver’s seat. He suddenly remembers the first time he went over to the Hale house under his own steam. The way Peter had said ‘someone has upset you’ like he was thinking about finding that person and teaching them a new definition of ‘regret’. Even before Derek and Stiles had officially been mates, the pack bond had been forming. Now Derek is exhibiting the same reaction to Isaac. Stiles is getting more and more sure that Isaac is Cora’s mate. Not that he’s ‘supposed to be’ or that he might be – that he is. Which means nothing can change that now.

“It’s nothing,” Isaac says, tugging at his shirt sleeve as if to hide them, even though Stiles has already seen.

“I know that the kids at Beacon Hills High can be assholes,” Stiles says. “Believe me, I know that better than just about anyone. If someone’s giving you a hard time – ”

“No,” Isaac says. “I’m fine. Thanks for worrying about me, but I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, and he lets it drop. He doesn’t want to push Isaac. He wants Isaac to trust him, because he has a feeling that when they finally get rid of Seth, they’re going to need Isaac. Cora is going to need him.

But he makes a mental note. He’s going to need to talk to Danny. Maybe talk to some of the teachers, if there are any there that are still willing. Finstock will talk to him, and he’s more observant than a lot of people give him credit for. He’ll figure out who’s bothering Isaac.

This thought makes him suddenly tired. He’s already got so much on his plate. He doesn’t think he can handle adding anything else. Maybe he’ll talk to his father instead. God knows that the principal at Beacon Hills High is probably still terrified of Tom and Talia. That ought to work. He can text Danny when he has a free minute.

Once they drop off Isaac, he leans over to Derek and says, “Gimme a kiss.”

Derek laughs softly, but obliges. “What was that for?”

“Because I think I’m going to ask my dad to talk to a few of Isaac’s teachers, instead of doing it myself.”

Derek arches an eyebrow at him. “That calls for a lot more than a kiss,” he says. “I think we should go somewhere that we can celebrate much more thoroughly.”

It’s a terrible idea, really. It’s already late, and he has school tomorrow, and half his homework is still undone. But he doesn’t care. He feels good, and things between him and Derek are okay. And if he can’t celebrate the good things, what’s the point in any of this?

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Surprisingly, it isn’t Derek who finally snaps and tries to break Seth’s face. It’s not Peter, either,
which would have been Stiles’ second guess, and it’s not even Stiles himself. It turns out to be Scott, who was roughly the last person anybody would have expected. Stiles isn’t even sure what happened at first. It’s a typical Tuesday evening. He’s in the kitchen, dinner’s in the oven, everything is normal. Derek had just gotten home about five minutes previous and gone to take his regular post-work shower. Talia’s been home for a little while. Court let out early because of an opponent’s sudden agreement to settle and she decided to come straight home instead of going back to the office.

In retrospect, it’s not exactly strange that Scott is the one to lose control. The others all have years or even decades of learning to control the shift and the emotional volatility that comes with the phases of the moon. But Scott has only been a werewolf for about six months, and he struggled to anchor himself at first. Things have been better, a lot better, for the past couple full moons, but even so, there are limits. And Scott, unlike Derek, doesn’t have the instinctual reluctance to hurt another pack member’s mate.

When it goes down, all Stiles hears is a roar that doesn’t sound human, a thump, and a yelp of pain. He drops what he’s doing – figuratively, one has to be careful with eggs – and bolts into the living room. Then he hears Cora shout, “No, no, stop!”

By the time he gets into the room, Scott and Seth are in a ball on the floor. Scott is snarling and clawing, and Seth has his hands up to defend his face. Cora is trying to pull Scott off of him, with little success. She’s just as strong as any wolf, but Scott’s rage gives him strength. Stiles sure has hell isn’t about to get between them, so it’s not until Derek barrels down the stairs, sopping wet and completely naked, that the fight gets broken up. Derek grabs Scott around the waist, lifts, and throws. Scott bounces back off the wall and snarls. Derek snarls back, neither is cowed, and it looks like it might become a full on brawl.

Then Talia strides in and demands, “What is going on here?”

Everyone in the room, even Seth, flinches at the authority in her voice. Cora’s close to tears as she says, “Scott, Scott attacked Seth –”

“He deserved it!” Scott snarls. “Did you hear what that piece of shit said?”

“I don’t care what he said, you can’t just –”

“Did you hear?” Scott roars, and Cora flinches.

Talia’s voice is like ice. “Scott. What did Seth say?”

For the first time, Scott seems to notice his audience. His gaze darts uncertainly from Talia to Stiles as his features melt back into his human form. But then his jaw sets in a stubborn expression and he stares hard at Seth as he says, “I made some harmless comment about dinner smelling good and that asshole said it was a good thing Stiles was a good cook, since he’d be stuck as a housewife now that he’s retarded.” He bites out the word with angry force. Cora goes white. “He thought I wouldn’t hear him but I did and I’ve heard Stiles say similar things too often to have to listen to it from this –”

“That’s enough, Scott,” Talia says, and Scott shuts up. Talia takes a deep breath, then looks at Stiles and says, “Are you all right, Stiles?”

“I’m fine,” Stiles says, though he feels a little shaky. Still, in for a penny . . . “It’s not the first time he’s said that.”
Scott growls, low and angry, but Derek puts a hand on his shoulder and he subsides. Talia walks over to Seth and helps him to his feet, then settles him in a chair. He’s sulking as she turns his face from side to side, looking at the injuries. “Superficial,” she decides. “I’ll patch you up before I drive you home. Okay, Seth. I’m not going to ask you whether or not you said what Scott says you did.”

“You’re just going to take his word over mine?” Seth asks, pouting.

“To be frank, yes,” Talia says. “Scott is a lousy liar and he has a million tells. And no, this isn’t the first time you’ve said that or something like it, so it doesn’t exactly strain credulity.” She stands back, folds her arms over her chest, and takes a deep breath. “First of all, even if what you were saying about Stiles was true and he wound up as nothing more than our denmaker for the rest of his life, that still wouldn’t be something to scoff at. The denmaker is one of the most honored positions in packs. The denmaker takes what is merely a place and turns it into a home. Sharing meals is important for packs, both in terms of hierarchy and togetherness, not just in terms of nutrition.

“Secondly, even if what you were saying was true, Stiles would still deserve your admiration for, if nothing else, the manner in which he received those injuries and the resultant damage. He risked his life to save this entire pack. If he hadn’t chosen – on his own, without any direction from us – to infiltrate the WLO and try to find out what Kate Argent had in store for this family, it’s quite likely that many of the people in this room would have died horrible, agonizing deaths. So even if Stiles was a drooling vegetable, I still would not allow anyone to speak of him with anything but the highest respect.”

She takes another deep breath and lets it out. Stiles can tell that she’s struggling to stay calm, not to just throw Seth out of the pack completely. “Thirdly, what you are saying is not true, and you have absolutely no idea how lucky you are that it was Scott who took exception to it and not somebody else. And I’m not talking about Peter. I’ve seen the way you watch Peter, but he is not the only dangerous person in this pack, and to be honest, Sheriff Stilinski would have had you out on your ass nursing a black eye a lot faster than Peter would have.

“Stiles was injured, severely, while protecting this pack, and he is still in recovery. It’s not something that happens overnight, and I expect every single pack member to support him one hundred and ten percent while he’s recovering. Is all of that perfectly clear to you, Seth?”

Gaze trained on the floor, face sullen, Seth mutters, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” Another deep breath. “I’m going to get you patched up and take you home. I think we’ve all had enough for one day. Stiles, why don’t you and Scott go out for a run? I think he needs to blow off some steam. Derek, your sister – ”

“On it,” Derek says, kneeling besides Cora, who’s still miserably speechless.

Stiles figures that they probably shouldn’t come back for a while as he nods and pulls Scott out of the house, giving his still-dripping-wet, still-naked boyfriend a wistful look over one shoulder. It’s a good thing that dinner will be all right waiting for a while. Scott stalks an angry stalk until they’re a few hundred yards away from the house. Then he bursts out with, “What the hell did you mean, he’s said that shit before? Is that why you’ve been avoiding him? And why Cora won’t look you in the eye?”

Stiles gives a sigh and pushes a hand through his hair. “Yeah, he’s made a few comments. Derek told him to shut the fuck up, and I just . . . reminded myself that I gave zero fucks about his opinion.”
Scott looks at him suspiciously. “Are you sure that this isn’t some thing like, you secretly think he’s got a point so you can’t bring yourself to argue?”

“No,” Stiles says, then amends, “well, maybe a little. At least at first. And don’t give me that look. You know better than anyone that this has been shit to deal with.” Which is true. Scott is his brother, and as the person most removed from the situation and thus least likely to feel guilt, he received the majority of Stiles’ bitching and moaning for the first several months of his recovery. “But I’m sure as fuck all not going to let that jerk call me retarded.”

“Good.” Scott folds his arms across his chest. “Geez. I’m in trouble now, huh?”

“Pfft, no,” Stiles says. “You didn’t do anything that everyone hasn’t wanted to do for the past three weeks. It was only a question of whose temper was going to snap first. He’s lucky it was yours.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Scott huffs out a breath. “Why are we even putting up with this? I mean, I guess we have to, right? Because he’s Cora’s mate. But doesn’t that seem, I don’t know, weird to you? Cora’s so nice and everything. Aren’t you supposed to meet someone compatible? I mean, obviously Allison is like a million times better than I am but we do have a lot in common when it comes to the basics. And so do you and Derek. Seth is like everything that Cora isn’t.”

Stiles tries not to look shifty. He’s realized at this point that the other pack members know what’s going on. They know that it’s Peter’s place – and to a lesser extent, Stiles’ – to figure out what Seth is up to, and that Talia will signal when things have changed. But Scott doesn’t have the same instincts, and if he keeps pushing at things, he might inadvertently back Seth to a wire and force him to ask for a contract. “Look,” he says, “I’ll tell you about what we think is going on, but you have to swear you won’t tell anyone else, okay?”

Scott frowns. “Uh, okay, I promise,” he says.

“Peter and I are working on this theory that Seth somehow tricked Cora into thinking he’s her mate,” Stiles says, and sees Scott’s eyes go wide. “Talia kind of agrees, I mean, she doesn’t want this jerk in her pack, but she’s afraid that if she pushes too hard, he’ll have Cora ask for a contract. And that could be a disaster.”

“Yeah, okay, I can see that,” Scott says, “but I thought the whole point of the Searching Ceremony was that if you found the one, you would know.”

“And that’s where we’re stuck,” Stiles says, with a sigh. “I mean, I just don’t see the point in this. Would there be an advantage to insinuating yourself into a pack? Sure. But he’s not trying to do that. He knows that nobody can stand him.”

“Yeah, it’s almost like he’s trying to piss us off,” Scott agrees.


“What, that he’s trying to piss us off?” Scott asks.

“Yeah. Maybe I’ve been thinking about this all backwards. When I couldn’t figure out why he wouldn’t be trying to ingratiate himself into the pack, it never occurred to me that maybe he was doing the opposite. Pushing us. Testing the boundaries, seeing how much he would have to antagonize us before the pack would reject him.”

Scott thinks about this. “I guess that would make sense. But I don’t really see the reason anyone would want to do that, either.”
Stiles’ face falls. “Uh . . . me neither. But at least it’s something that I hadn’t thought of yet. You know. I’ll take it.”

When Sheriff Stilinski shows up at the Hale house the next evening, it’s not until after dinner. He’s in full uniform and has a grim face. He has a quiet word with Talia, and most of the rest of the pack scatters. Stiles is in the middle of making a pie, but he abandons it the instant that his father sits down at the kitchen table. Tom frowns at him but then, surprisingly, doesn’t try to shoo him away. He seems to understand that Stiles will only find a way to eavesdrop if he does that. He lets out a slow breath and looks between Talia and Peter. “Peter, I have to ask you some questions about Gerard Argent.”

“Is this an official interrogation?” Talia asks. “Because I’m not a criminal lawyer.”

“No,” Tom says. “Not yet. But I won’t lie to you, Talia, it’s going to be. Consider this a rehearsal. A warrant has been issued for your arrest, Peter. I’m going to have to take you in no matter what your answers are.”

“On what evidence?” Talia asks. She’s obviously trying to control her temper. She knows better than to be angry at Tom, but she’s also clearly angry.

Tom lets out a slow breath. “Peter’s fingerprints have been found at the scene of Gerard’s murder.”

At this, Peter sits up straight. “Well,” he murmurs, “that is certainly interesting.”

“Interesting is one way to put it,” Tom remarks. “Incriminating is another.”

“Oh, please,” Peter says. “Do you honestly think I’m stupid enough to leave fingerprints at a crime scene?”

“No,” Tom says evenly, “but I also think ‘I’m too experienced with crime to leave evidence’ is not a great alibi.”

Peter just shrugs as if to say that he doesn’t see why not.

“Peter,” Tom says, “come on. You’ve been suspiciously absent ever since the sentencing phase of Gerard’s trial. Now that he’s dead, all of a sudden you’re back in town. Nobody here believes that’s a coincidence. Whatever you’re hiding, you’d better come clean.”

Peter sighs as if this is all too plebian for words. “Yes,” he says, “I came back because Gerard is dead. Not because I killed him. Because I’ve been conducting surveillance on him and a number of his lackeys. I wanted to make sure that he didn’t make trouble for our pack now that he was free. I did, after all, kill his daughter. It was a reasonable precaution. Would you like to know how I’m sure that I didn’t leave fingerprints in his house?”

Tom gives a ‘go on’ gesture, so Peter does. “I was there that night,” he says, and Talia makes an unhappy noise. “I had been stopping by on random occasions, thinking that if he had visitors, and I didn’t know when they might arrive, spot checks were the best way to accomplish that. He never left the house himself. He had the GPS anklet, and he was, after all, a very sick man. When I arrived Saturday night, about nine o’clock, I couldn’t hear his heartbeat in the house. So I let

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When Sheriff Stilinski shows up at the Hale house the next evening, it’s not until after dinner. He’s in full uniform and has a grim face. He has a quiet word with Talia, and most of the rest of the pack scatters. Stiles is in the middle of making a pie, but he abandons it the instant that his father sits down at the kitchen table. Tom frowns at him but then, surprisingly, doesn’t try to shoo him away. He seems to understand that Stiles will only find a way to eavesdrop if he does that. He lets out a slow breath and looks between Talia and Peter. “Peter, I have to ask you some questions about Gerard Argent.”

“Is this an official interrogation?” Talia asks. “Because I’m not a criminal lawyer.”

“No,” Tom says. “Not yet. But I won’t lie to you, Talia, it’s going to be. Consider this a rehearsal. A warrant has been issued for your arrest, Peter. I’m going to have to take you in no matter what your answers are.”

“On what evidence?” Talia asks. She’s obviously trying to control her temper. She knows better than to be angry at Tom, but she’s also clearly angry.

Tom lets out a slow breath. “Peter’s fingerprints have been found at the scene of Gerard’s murder.”

At this, Peter sits up straight. “Well,” he murmurs, “that is certainly interesting.”

“Interesting is one way to put it,” Tom remarks. “Incriminating is another.”

“Oh, please,” Peter says. “Do you honestly think I’m stupid enough to leave fingerprints at a crime scene?”

“No,” Tom says evenly, “but I also think ‘I’m too experienced with crime to leave evidence’ is not a great alibi.”

Peter just shrugs as if to say that he doesn’t see why not.

“Peter,” Tom says, “come on. You’ve been suspiciously absent ever since the sentencing phase of Gerard’s trial. Now that he’s dead, all of a sudden you’re back in town. Nobody here believes that’s a coincidence. Whatever you’re hiding, you’d better come clean.”

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myself in and found his body.”

Tom rubs both hands over his face. “You’re supposed to call the police if you find a dead body.”

“I did. I used his house phone to dial 911, left it off the hook, and left before anyone could arrive. Your records can verify that, I’m sure.” Peter gives a slight shrug. “From the time I left my car to the time I got back in it, I was wearing surgical gloves. It is literally impossible that I could have left a fingerprint there.”

“Christ,” Tom mutters. “So you were at the crime scene, and whether those prints were planted or not, we have physical evidence that you were there.”

“So what?” Peter asks. “They don’t have physical evidence that I killed him.”

“They don’t need it, Peter,” Tom says. He starts to count points off on his fingers. “You had motive. You have a history of physical violence towards this family. You were at the crime scene. They don’t need more than that, Peter, and a jury won’t either. You do realize that as a werewolf, you’re facing the death penalty for this, right?”

“He is?” Stiles blurts out.

The sheriff looks up and sighs. “Yes, Stiles. A werewolf who killed a human always faces the death penalty, unless they can invoke pack protection, even if they don’t use werewolfy powers to do it. You know that. And I’m sorry, Peter, but you can’t use ‘if I’d murdered him, I would’ve done a better job’ as a defense.”

“I don’t see why not,” Peter says complacently. “Let me guess. You didn’t find my fingerprints. You found my fingerprint. Singular.”

“Two of them, actually,” Tom says, with a sigh. “Thumb and index finger.”

Peter looks at Stiles, then picks up the beer bottle he’s holding as if to toast him with it. Stiles looks at the way he’s holding it. Thumb and forefinger. “Seth got your prints,” he says. “That’s why he’s here.”

“No,” Peter says. “I think this was incidental. Think about the timing. The Searching Ceremonies were about a week before Gerard’s sentencing. They couldn’t have put him here for that purpose. But I think they used him to get them. Which means that these two things are connected.”

Stiles’ eyes went wide. “Which means that whoever killed Gerard is the same person who’s behind what Seth’s doing.”

“Hey,” Tom says sharply. “Stiles, this isn’t your business. This is a police investigation.”

“What happened to Gerard is, yes,” Peter says. “What’s happening with Seth is not.”

“Okay, wait just a second,” Tom says.

It’s clear that he’s getting angry, and Stiles knows his father a lot better than Peter does. So he quickly chimes in with, “No, my dad’s right. I mean, if there’s something I can look into, by all means let me know, but Gerard’s murder is something I should keep my nose out of.”

Tom looks somewhat skeptical, but he lets this slide. Talia rubs her hands over her face and changes the subject slightly, as if to draw the sheriff’s attention away from his son. “I have a concern, though. This won’t be your investigation, Tom. The murder took place in a different
county. They’ve already issued a warrant for Peter’s arrest, and they’re just letting you bring him in out of professional courtesy. If they think they’ve got their man, will they continue an investigation at all?"

“I think that between the two of us, we probably have enough clout that we can get them to do so, yes,” Tom says. “I’m not saying it’ll be easy, just that it’s possible.”

Talia nods. “All right, then. I’m going to call Omar. He’s a criminal lawyer in our firm, the best. He’ll meet you down at the station.”

“Okay,” Tom says, and stands up. “Peter?”

“Yes, I’ll go along,” Peter says, with a sigh as if this is all too inconvenient for words. But he looks at Stiles over his shoulder as he leaves the kitchen, and Stiles can only nod, even though he has no idea what Peter thinks he can do.

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Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a mishmash of medical jargon, legal jargon, and chess metaphors. My apologies in advance if I messed anything up and/or it's completely incomprehensible. =D

Stiles adds Gerard Argent’s murder to his crime wall as soon as he gets home the next evening. He’s again told Derek that he’ll be working on WLO cases. He hates lying to Derek, hates it with a passion, and he’s sure that sooner or later, Derek is going to catch on. But he doesn’t know what else to do. Peter doesn’t want him telling anyone what’s going on. And Stiles is very, very sure that if his father catches wind of this, he’ll be told to stop under no uncertain terms.

But even with all the facts about Gerard’s murder spread out in front of him, he doesn’t know what to do with them. It doesn’t make any sense. Peter’s been transferred to the custody of the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Department, where Gerard was killed. Talia has tried to pull some strings, but apparently the district attorney there is a real hardass, and has insisted that Peter receive no special treatment. That means that he’ll be in custody for several days while he awaits his bail hearing.

Talia’s unhappy about that because werewolves almost never receive bail when they’re suspected of murder. “You mean he could be in jail until trial?” Stiles asked when she said that, and she gave him a short nod. He’d had to go into the bathroom and have a quiet panic attack over the idea of having to do all of this without Peter.

It’s been confirmed that several of Gerard’s medications were dosed with mountain ash, and Peter’s fingerprints were found in the bathroom where those medications were kept.

When that had been discovered, Talia had been brought in for questioning as well, under the theory that she could have been the alpha that gave Gerard the bite, that she and her brother could have been working together. Fortunately for Talia, she had been in a meeting with several business partners and a client when Gerard had been killed, so the police in Sonoma County had reluctantly cleared her.

There were several things the killer would have needed. Access to the house. Knowledge of Gerard’s medication. Most important, the knowledge that Gerard was trying to get the bite.

Peter’s theory that the alpha who gave him the bite wasn’t culpable is valid, but Stiles decides it’s the least likely of all the options. It seems too far-fetched that somebody could have simply stumbled upon the knowledge that Gerard was going to get the bite and dosed him in such a way. He also can’t fathom why any werewolf would want to save Gerard’s life. Stiles thinks whoever bit him and whoever killed him are the same person, or at least were working together.

That being said, it could have been almost anyone. There were over five hundred alphas in California alone. And Stiles is willing to bet that if he tried, he could find a motive for each and every single one of them. Everyone had been hurt by the WLO at some point, whether it was directly or tangentially.
He shares his theories with his father, who agrees with him. But things are getting ugly. The case is already being tried in the media, and most people seem to think that Peter is guilty. Killing Kate because she was directly threatening his family is one thing. Going after a sick, helpless old man – that was something else entirely. There are already protestors gathering around the Sonoma county courthouse.

“No way he gets bail,” Sheriff Stilinski says quietly over dinner. “Not unless we can find some exonerating sort of evidence. The judge will be crucified if he grants it.”

Stiles stares at his crime wall and wonders if he’s looking at this entirely the wrong way. If Gerard wasn’t the victim, but Peter was.

Peter’s dangerous. Everyone knows it. And Seth seemed to know it, too. What if Seth had reported back to his handlers – whoever they were – that Peter seemed too suspicious of him? What if they had decided to get Peter out of the way while Seth did – whatever? If Gerard Argent had just been a convenient, easy target, someone who could be easily killed, whose death could be easily pinned on Peter?

“It’s a valid theory,” Tom allows, stirring his pasta salad. They’re eating by themselves, at his house. The entire Hale family except for Cora, Jonathan, and the kids, is in Sonoma county to await the bail hearing the next day. “I’ll mention it to Talia and we’ll look into it.”

His point is firm. He wants Stiles to stay out of this. Stiles knows that. He knows his grades are suffering, knows that the stress is interfering with his recovery. But he can’t help it.

“Dad,” he says quietly. “How bad is this?”

Tom looks up. “It’s bad, kiddo. There’s a lot of public pressure. The county sheriff down there and the district attorney both seem pretty anti-werewolf, and they’ve both made up their minds about who’s guilty. We’ll need good, solid evidence that it would have been impossible for Peter to commit this crime. Forget reasonable doubt.”

“We need the alpha,” Stiles says, and Tom sighs and nods.

“Look, kid,” he says, “I don’t know much about this whole ‘bite rejection’ thing. You wanna give me a summary?”

Stiles thinks somewhat uncharitably for a moment that his father could use Google like everybody else, but then he realizes that Tom is just trying to give him a way to help, make him feel included.

“Okay, so, about two percent of people reject the bite,” he says. “Nobody’s absolutely sure of why some people do, or found a way to prevent a rejection. As far as scientists can tell, it’s some sort of auto-immune response.”

“The body’s immune system treats lycanthropy as some sort of virus?” Tom asks.

Stiles nods. “Yeah. Even though it’s not, not exactly. And the reason we know that is because, if they can get to you in time and completely suppress your immune system, you can survive a rejection. Whatever it is that causes lycanthropy, the changes are permanent, right? But the lycanthropy itself, the ‘virus’ or agent of change or whatever, only lasts until the next full moon. We know that because if the virus lasted forever, they’d have to keep your immune system suppressed forever. But they don’t. If they can keep you alive until after the full moon has passed, you’re fine. Except for whatever damage your immune system did before they got to you.”

“Like what?” Tom asks.

“A pandemic?”

“Yeah. A pandemic, that’s it.” Stiles nods. “And the flu normally kills people who are really old or really young, or weak for some sort of reason. But the Spanish flu, the reason it was so deadly is because it killed mostly young, healthy people. It seriously killed almost five percent of the entire world’s population. So, the question is, why? Because something about that particular strain of the flu caused an immune system response that devastated the body. It was called a . . . oh crap. A something storm.”

“Kid, I’m not going to be able to help you with that one,” Tom says.

Stiles nods and fumbles for his phone. He pulls up Wikipedia and then says, “Oh, right, a cytokine storm. Uh, how much detail do you want?” he asks, and Tom waves him off. “Basically, the flu itself wasn’t so much a danger as that the immune system went into complete overdrive and attacked everything that moved. Including your lungs and your liver, et cetera. Cytokines are like . . . little messenger cells that tell your immune system when to do its thing, and they get caught in a positive feedback loop, and everything just goes haywire.”

Tom pours himself more coffee. “It sounds kind of like an allergic reaction.”

“Uh, yeah, actually, it’s a similar mechanism,” Stiles says. “In fact, I think someone once did a study that proved that people with strong allergies like peanut or shellfish have a higher chance of rejecting the bite. I’d have to go look that up, though.” He waves this aside. “Anyway, that’s the basics.”

“So if it’s a natural response, why does something like mountain ash make a rejection more likely?”

Stiles shrugs. “Nobody knows, as far as I can tell. Some people theorize that it’s not a natural response. That if someone rejects the bite, it’s because of some previous exposure to wolfsbane, mountain ash, or mistletoe. But as far as we can tell . . . picture the lycanthropy as little, uh, little wolves in your bloodstream. And the immune system is a bunch of assholes with shotguns. Well, mountain ash is like steroids for those assholes.”

Tom considers this. “That is a terrible metaphor.”

“Well, it’s not exactly an easy thing to describe,” Stiles grumbles. “Especially to a guy who doesn’t even know what cytokines are.”

“But this isn’t something that happens immediately, right?” Tom asks.

Stiles shakes his head. “A cytokine storm can typically kill a person within twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Bite rejection is faster, but still takes two or three hours to kill you. The faster you get help, the less long-lasting damage there is, although you still end up pretty fucking sick for a few weeks. But yeah. Someone must have stayed with Gerard while he died, keeping him from calling for help.”

“What about the fact that he had cancer? Would that make any sort of difference to the time frame?”

“Geez. I’m not a doctor, you know.” Stiles rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “I think it would
only make a difference if he had a cancer that the immune system was involved in, like leukemia or something. Do you know what kind of cancer he had?”

“Prostate cancer.”

“Heh. Butt cancer. Serves him right.” Stiles sees his father’s disapproving look, and clears his throat. “Uh, and he was just on palliative care, right? No chemo or anything? Then I don’t think it would’ve made a difference.”

Tom nods. “Thanks, Stiles. This could be really helpful.”

The hearing is the next morning. Stiles gets a text from Derek during class at about ten AM. ‘no bail. held until trial.’ He tries to push away the churning panic in his gut. For the rest of the day, he’s tense, distracted. He’s not losing words, but that’s mainly because he’s not really talking. Cora is upset, too. They go home from school together, but don’t really talk.

Seth comes over, because of course he does. Stiles is still avoiding him, and everything he does, Stiles now views with suspicion. He makes chicken salad for dinner, and then a thought occurs to him. Seth might have gotten rid of Peter, Seth might think that Peter’s dangerous. But Seth has decided that Stiles isn’t, and Stiles wants to keep it that way.

“When’s your mom getting back in town?” Seth asks, through a mouthful. As much as he mocks Stiles, he never misses an opportunity to eat his cooking. It’s just the three of them. Laura and Jonathan are eating at Jonathan’s parents’ house with the kids. Chris Argent has used this opportunity to forbid Allison from going over to the Hale house, and she doesn’t want to challenge him until it’s blown over. Scott is over at her place for moral support.

“Tomorrow,” Cora says. “She wants to talk to some people down there. Derek and Laura will be back some time tonight.”

“Aaron was going to stay down there, too,” Stiles chips in. “He has some . . . God, what’s the word? People that he knows.”

“Contacts,” Cora says glumly.

“There really anything they can do?” Seth asks. “I mean, he looks pretty guilty, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Cora just murmurs. “He says he didn’t, though.”

Seth laughs. “Like he’d tell you if he’d done it?”

“No, he might not,” Stiles says, and Seth looks a little surprised that Stiles is agreeing with him. “Peter is a . . . not a truth-teller.”

“A liar,” Seth says. “Yeah, that’s kind of part of the whole Left Hand thing, right? Keeping secrets.”

“Peter’s too smart to leave his fingerprints at a crime scene,” Cora says, with more spirit.

“Maybe he . . .” Stiles stops to struggle for words. He sees Seth laugh at him, and looks away, feigning frustration. Good. Let Seth think he’s stupid and harmless. He doesn’t want Seth to decide that he needs to be removed, too. “I’m just going to . . . to go finish up in the kitchen,” he says, and Seth’s smirk follows him out of the room.
Derek is tying his boots and preparing to head to work when he hears someone approaching his doorway. He looks up, surprised and concerned, because he knows his sister’s scent and the pattern of her heartbeat. Cora appears in the doorway a few moments later, twining hair around her fingers. “Hey,” he says. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Yeah,” she says, fidgeting. “But I thought . . . could you take me to go visit Peter?”

Derek lets out a breath. Cora hadn’t gone down with the rest of the family when he had had his bail hearing, so she hadn’t seen him in nearly a week. Ostensibly, that was because she was in school. But Derek knows that it was partly because of everything else that’s going on. Whatever that is. Derek frankly isn’t sure.

Everyone in the family is smart enough to know that Peter would never leave blatant evidence like fingerprints at a crime scene. They knew this without having to be told. They also knew that nobody in the pack would ever use his fingerprints in such a way. That meant the only person who would have had the opportunity to frame Peter was Seth.

Derek isn’t sure what to do about it. Pack instinct says to follow Talia’s lead, let her and Peter handle this. But he has the distinct feeling that they’re being outmaneuvered somehow. And he doesn’t know what’s going on with Stiles, either. His mate hates Seth for so many reasons that Derek can’t be sure what he has and hasn’t figured out.

Regardless, he can’t leave Cora looking like this, wounded and uncertain. It’s not his sister, not the way she should be. He sighs and pulls out his phone. “Let me call in,” he says. He’s lucky that his boss has been understanding of the time he’s needed to take off so far. Of course, he would be an idiot to fire Derek, who does ninety percent of the heavy labor around the landscaping firm and would be difficult to replace. Still, some people are idiots.

Cora nods and continues to twist her hair around her fingers until Derek finishes getting ready and heads downstairs. He texts his mother to let him know where they’re going, because he doesn’t want her freaking out if the school calls to report Cora’s absence. Then they get in the car and head south. Santa Rosa is about a two hour drive away.

Under normal circumstances, Derek wouldn’t mind four hours in a car with his younger sister. But Cora is moody and silent. It’s not like her at all. So much isn’t like her these days. She has days where she’s angry and short-tempered, days where she’s close to tears all the time, days when she’s giggly and insipid. Derek doesn’t know where to begin helping her, but he misses his sister, and he’s beginning to lose patience with the way things are going.

“Why doesn’t Mom just get rid of him?” Cora finally asks, breaking the silence.

Derek looks over at her, startled not so much by the question, but by the fact that it was Cora who was asking. He hadn’t been sure if Cora had realized that Seth had most likely played a role in Peter’s imprisonment. “I don’t know,” he finally says. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?” he suggests.

“That’s stupid,” Cora scoffs.

Derek sighs. “If she got rid of Seth . . . would that hurt you?” he asks, and Cora nods, wiping her eyes. “That’s your answer, then.”
“I don’t know that I’m worth this,” Cora says.

“Of course you are,” Derek says. “Look, whatever’s going on, we’re going to get it figured out. Okay?”

Cora nods and lapses back into miserable silence.

Derek tries to play some good music on the way down I-5 to cheer her up. It doesn’t seem to work very well. They grab a quick bite to eat when they reach Santa Rosa, as it’s about eleven o’clock in the morning and he’s not sure how long they’ll be at the jail. Talia has texted him to let them know she’s called ahead.

This is his second visit, so he knows what to expect. Peter’s a werewolf, which means special precautions. His cell is lined with mountain ash, and he gets his meals there under supervision. Werewolves are almost always in solitary confinement while imprisoned if only because keeping them under lock and key is so difficult, in addition to how dangerous they can be to other prisoners.

That also means no unsupervised visits. No glass wall and a telephone while a guard paces idly by and occasionally glances over. They meet in another mountain ash room – Derek shudders as the door closes behind them – with a guard standing behind Peter with a taser at the ready. Peter doesn’t seem to notice he’s there. He’s focused solely on his niece and nephew as they walk into the room. He looks up and his eyes flare blue, lip curling back into a snarl. Derek freezes. It hadn’t occurred to him that Peter might react to Cora as an enemy, but he could hardly blame him if he did. “Uncle Peter,” he says.

After a moment, the blue fades out of Peter’s eyes. “Derek,” he says, “and little Cora. Welcome to my humble abode. Sit down.”

Derek does so, cautiously drawing Cora down next to him. There’s a flat metal table between them. Peter is handcuffed to it, and the cuffs must have a high silver content, if the marks on his wrists are any indication. Derek wants to protest that there’s no need for all of this, but he knows that if Talia wasn’t able to get any special accommodations for Peter, he sure as hell won’t be able to.

“How are you feeling?” Derek asks.

“Good,” Peter says. “I feel good.” He looks glazed and distant. Derek grits his teeth. Forced separation from one’s pack is hard for any wolf, but it’s worse for someone like Peter, who’s already adrift so much of the time. “I had trouble sleeping, but that’s to be expected.”

It’s also obvious, from the dark smudges under his eyes to the way his hair is mussed from all the tossing and turning. Derek knows that under most circumstances, Peter is just as meticulous with his appearance as he is with the rest of his life. “Is there anything we can bring you?” he asks.

“Peter shakes his head. “How are things at home? How is Olivia?”

Derek freezes, for a minute terrified that he’s going to have to break the news of Olivia’s death to Peter. Then Peter frowns, a shadow passing over his face, and he shakes his head.


“She’s fine, Uncle Peter,” Derek says, breathing a silent sigh of relief. “Just as short-tempered as ever.”

“She doesn’t do well without a Left Hand,” Peter says, with true anxiety in his tone. “She’s too straightforward. She can’t see around corners the way I can. It’s important that I get back to her as
soon as possible.” He shakes his head again. “And the others. The children. How are the children?”

“They’re okay too,” Derek says.

“Good, good.” Peter rubs both hands over his face. “What about Stiles?”

“He’s fine,” Derek says.

“You shouldn’t be mad at him,” Peter says. “He’s only been doing the things I asked him to do.”

It takes effort, but Derek keeps his eyes from narrowing. “What things?”

Peter blinks at him for a moment, then says, “Did you know that in chess, the king is the most important piece on the board, but also the weakest? The job of all the other pieces is to protect the king.”

“Uh, yeah,” Derek says, trying to keep up with Peter’s train of thought. “Yeah, I did know that, actually.”

“That’s the problem we’re having now,” Peter continues to ramble. “The king is exposed. The knight is pinned down.” He waves a hand to one side. “It’s very problematic. The queen is the strongest piece on the board. She can basically go anywhere, do anything. Everyone else is just – pieces.” He waves his hand again. “That’s what we need. We need the queen to take action.”

“Who’s the queen, Uncle Peter?” Derek asks, leaning over the table.

Peter blinks at him. “What?”

Derek lets out a breath and tries to stay calm. “In the metaphor. Who’s the queen?”

“Nobody,” Peter says, and frowns. “Chess is a stupid game. Everyone with defined roles, only able to move to certain spaces. Real life isn’t like that at all.”

Derek rubs his hands over his temples. “Then why were you talking about it?”

“I don’t know,” Peter says vaguely. “Was I?”

Cora takes in a harsh, trembling breath, and finally manages to speak. “I’m sorry, Uncle Peter,” she says. “I’m really sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Peter says. “Chess was invented long before you were born.”

For a minute, Derek thinks he’s even more confused, but then he hears Cora’s weak chuckle and realizes that Peter was trying to make her laugh. She wipes tears out of her eyes.

“Now,” Peter says, “you two should get home. This isn’t a nice place to be, and I don’t . . . I don’t like you seeing me like this. I’ll be home soon. Don’t come here again.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Cora asks, her voice trembling.

Peter is never okay, Derek thinks, and for a minute it looks like Peter might actually point that out to her. But then he just smiles and says, “Of course,” and reaches across the table to her. He’s pulled up short by the chains, and the guard behind him jabs him in the shoulder with the taser, although thankfully he doesn’t trigger it.
“That’s not necessary,” Peter says sharply, with a curl to his lip.

“No contact between the prisoner and the visitors,” the guard says.

Peter stares at him for a moment with that feral look in his eyes before he turns back to his niece and nephew and says, “They’re real charmers here, as you can tell. Give my love to the others.”

It’s clearly a dismissal, and since they won’t be allowed to touch him – and God how Derek aches to lean across the table and leave his scent on Peter so he’ll have the scent of pack to comfort him in his solitude – Derek nods and stands. He puts an arm around Cora’s shoulders and draws her out of the room. She looks over her shoulder, but the guard swings the door shut before she can get another look at their uncle.

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Tom gives a brief knock on the door to Talia’s office before heading in. Talia looks up from where she’s sitting behind her desk, and tucks a stray hair behind her ear. Aaron’s there as well, perched on the edge of the desk, tapping away at his phone. “Hey, how are you,” he greets Tom, getting up and giving him one of those handshakes that turns into a bear hug.

“Not too bad,” Tom says. “What about you two?”

“We’re hanging in there,” Aaron says, moving over to stand behind Talia and rub her shoulders. “Any news?”

Tom huffs out a sigh. “I spent half the morning on the phone with that damned deputy that they keep farming my calls out to. He’s playing stupid, and it’s getting hard to resist the urge to drive down there and shove my badge up his nose. We had a good long talk about how likely it would be that a murderer would manage to leave fingerprints on a bottle of pills but not, say, on the counter or the door or anything else in the house. He maintains it’s possible.”

“Of course he does,” Talia says, rubbing her temples. “They’ve got their man.”

“Yeah. And he said some stuff I really didn’t like about questioning Peter further. I think they’re hoping that the extended isolation will addle his brains enough that he’ll say something incriminating. Or at least something that could be painted in an incriminating light.”

“Jesus,” Aaron says, as Talia curls her lip into a silent snarl. “Tell me that you were recording this.”

“Come on, Aaron. I was a cop talking to another cop. You release anything from this conversation and I’ll lose my job.”

Aaron sighs and pushes both hands through his hair. “Do you have any good news?”

“Well, the good news is that unless they can figure out who the alpha that bit Gerard was, they’re going to have a lot of trouble ‘proving’ that Peter poisoned Gerard with malice aforethought. They could get him on assault for poisoning him, but without the alpha, there’s no intent to kill. Where are we on that?”

“I’ve talked to every other alpha in a two hundred mile radius,” Talia says wearily. “Everyone
seems pretty shocked by the manner of Gerard’s death. But – God damn it, this isn’t my skill set. This is what the Left Hand does, and they – they took mine away.”

Aaron grimaces and rubs her shoulders again. Since Tom is frowning faintly, he says, “Any disruption to the pack hierarchy is difficult on the alpha.”

“I get that,” Tom says, “but Peter’s out of play for the moment. So we have to –”

“That’s the problem,” Talia says. “I’ve never dealt with this sort of thing without a Left Hand. I don’t know what I’m doing. And do you have any idea how much this terrifies me? That Peter was outmaneuvered? I’ve never seen him get played like this before. This just – it doesn’t happen.”

“Look, you say that like we’re out of the running,” Tom says. “I get that this is upsetting for you in a way that I can’t really feel. But this ain’t over ‘til it’s over. We’re not going to let Peter rot in jail – or be executed, for that matter. We’re just going to have to find a way to clear him. And the best way to do that will be to figure out who really did this. If the damned cops in Santa Rosa won’t stop stonewalling me, we’re just have to conduct our own investigations. We have all of Peter’s notes, we know that Gerard was still meeting with some of his WLO cronies, so let’s see if we can round them up, find out if any of them knew he was planning to get the bite, or from who. Get me the names of some of the alphas whose packs were hurt most by the WLO, they’re the most likely suspects. We’ll get it sorted out.”

Talia nods. “The prosecutors want to fast-track the trial.”

“Can we delay them?” Aaron asks.

“Judge Harrelson says he’s probably going to grant it,” Talia says. “I’ve talked to Omar, we’re going to file for a change of venue, so that’ll gum up the works some. I mean, God knows I can file enough briefs to bury them in paperwork, but . . . we need to get this out of Harrelson’s court.”

“Can we claim sort of bias?” Tom asks. “Get him to recuse himself?”

“I’ll dig into him,” Aaron says. “See if I can find any affiliations or past court cases that might help us get it away from him.” He rubs a hand over his hair. “It’ll be a hell of a lot of reading. He’s been on the bench over twenty years. D’you think Stiles could – ”

Tom groans. “Please, for the love of God, don’t get Stiles involved in this.”

“That bad?” Aaron asks.

“He thinks I don’t know,” Tom says, “as if Dr. Kuan didn’t email me the instant his grades started slipping. Yeah, it’s that bad. He’s dropped from an A to a B in biology, turned his last expository writing paper in two days late, tanked a history test so badly that it looked like gibberish to poor Ms. Ricci, who didn’t even know what to do with it.”

Aaron grimaced. “You don’t think – he’s getting worse?”

“No,” Tom says, “it isn’t that. He’s just not putting the time in. He’s investigating Seth and I know damned well he’s investigating Gerard’s murder even though he won’t admit it. He’s doing cases for Deucalion and he’s still stuck on that damned nursery murder.”

“I’ll talk to Duke,” Talia says. “Let him know Stiles will have to put it on the back burner.”

Tom shakes his head and says with a grim smile, “That won’t make a damned bit of difference to Stiles. It’ll still be there, in the back of his head. And to someone with ADD, that’s stressful.
Knowing that it’s waiting for him, even when it isn’t right in front of him. It just . . . hangs out in the background, eating up his focus. He knows he can’t put it off forever, and eventually it’ll be important, and he’ll have re-order things again, and he’ll run his brain in circles around it.

“I was hoping that if we could get this resolved quickly enough, he’d stabilize on his own, without me having to interfere. He’s trying to compensate by sleeping less and working harder. He hasn’t yet figured out that it’s not going to work. That all he’s doing by pushing himself is making it even more difficult for him to get his shit done. I mean, I think he knows that, but he hasn’t internalized it yet. He thinks he can just work harder, and harder, and – ” Tom breaks off with a sigh. “And a year ago it would’ve worked and he would’ve pushed through it. But he can’t do that anymore.”

“Have you talked to him about his grades?” Aaron asks.

“Not yet. I was going to, but then Peter got arrested and everything went to hell. Even if I tell him to reprioritize, he won’t be able to manage it, not when he’s so emotionally tied up in what’s going on.”

Talia nods. “Well, in this particular arena where Peter is concerned, there isn’t much he can do. Aaron, if you want some help looking through Harrelson’s old cases, I’ll pick out a couple of paralegals for you. Frankly it might be better to have someone with legal experience looking for conflicts of interest anyway.”

Aaron nods back. “Okay, sounds good.”

“What’s on the schedule for tomorrow?” Tom asks.

“I’m going back down to Santa Rosa.” Talia tries to smile. “Speaking of Stiles. He baked a batch of those triple chocolate cookies that Peter loves so much, and wants me to bring them down. Well, actually, he wanted to go, but he’s got school, and . . . I know Peter wouldn’t want anyone to see him like this.”

“Okay. If you need me for anything, let me know.” Tom checks his watch. “I’ve got to get going. I’ve put off all my regular work all morning so I could talk to that yahoo. I’ll probably be late tonight, so go ahead and eat without me.”

“I was about to say the same thing,” Talia says, and they laugh, even though none of them really finds it funny.

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Chapter 11

Since Cora isn’t in school and therefore won’t wonder where he went, Stiles ditches too, and drives east to the somewhat ironically named Paradise, California, where Seth went to high school. He doesn’t even know what he’s looking for. But background check after background check has turned up clean. There has to be something. If Seth set Peter up, he’s the only one who might be able to get him out of it. Anything is better than sitting around and feeling helpless.

With Peter out of the picture, Stiles has no idea how he’s going to manage to get into Seth’s apartment. He could go during school hours, but what if Seth is there? Stiles has his class schedule, but there’s no guarantee that he actually goes to those classes. He wonders if maybe he can find out what his grades are.

He drives to the high school and hits very surprising paydirt on the first try. Seth was – is – an athlete. He was on the high school football team. Stiles has seen the team’s roster in an internet article that had been dug up by the background check. He was also on the wrestling team and had taken home several trophies. So he figures he’ll start with the coach. God knows that Finstock can probably remember every star lacrosse player he’s ever had for the past fifty years, and Seth graduated high school less than a year ago.

He waits for the bell to ring, for people to be moving around between classes, and then ducks into the gymnasium. He finds the small office where the coach is going through some papers before his next class, and gives it a smart knock. “Hey, uh, Coach Brandon, right?” he asks.

The man glances up and nods. “You new?” he asks.

“Oh, uh, no, I’m not a student here,” Stiles says. There had been a sign at the front that stated visitors were supposed to register at the front desk, which he had ignored. “I’m actually, uh, I’m a journalism student at Beacon Hills Community College.” He doesn’t really look old enough to be a college student, but screw it, this guy isn’t going to ask for his ID. “I’m doing a piece on Seth Freudenberg, he’s a freshman who was chosen at the Searching Ceremonies this year.”

The coach grunts. “Sounds vaguely familiar. What about it?”

“Well, I thought you could maybe answer some questions about him, since he was on your football team?”

The man rubs a hand over his head. “What was his name again?”

“Seth. Seth Freudenberg.” Stiles pulls up a picture on his phone and holds it out.

“Well, kid, I don’t know what to tell you. I’ve never seen him in my life.”

Stiles frowns. “He went to school here. He won at least two wrestling trophies. This was last year.”

“Well no, kid, I’ve been the coach of the wrestling team for the last twelve years. I can name every kid who won a trophy, and he isn’t one of them.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, and shakes his head a little. “Sorry. Maybe I came to the wrong place.”

He heads out, and the guy shouts after him, “You’d better check in at the front office, they’ll give you hell for not having a tag.”
“Yeah, thanks,” Stiles calls over his shoulder. He doesn’t really care, because once he’s in the hallway, he just looks like one of a hundred high school kids. As long as he walks purposefully, like he has somewhere to be, nobody will stop to question him.

He heads to the school library. There’s no way he’s in the wrong place; he’s read the background check more times than he can count. He had the coach’s name, even. But someone has erased whoever really won those wrestling trophies from the article and put in a different name instead.

He has to wait until the classes change again to get into the library, because the girl at the front desk is asking for passes, and he needs a crowd to slip in undetected. The last thing he needs is someone trying to give him a detention. He squeezes in between two bigger kids and looks around until he finds the old school yearbooks. He’s never been sure why schools keep their own yearbooks, but it’s coming to his advantage now.

By this point, he’s expecting what he’ll find, and there’s no Seth Freudenberg listed. He flips through all the kids just to see if Seth’s face is anywhere, but it isn’t. The football and wrestling teams have their own spread, but neither his face nor his name is there.

Seth Freudenberg does not exist.

“Jesus,” Stiles says to the yearbook. “Then who the hell is in our fucking house?”

He pushes both hands through his hair, shoves the yearbook back into the stacks, and beats feet. He sits in his car for a long minute, thinking about what he’s discovered. Whoever had put together Seth’s fake identity had been very, very good. The amount of detail they had used was staggering. They had had literally no idea that it was a fake.

But he still doesn’t understand why. If Seth wanted to infiltrate the Hale pack, why make himself as obnoxious as possible? He had to be smarter than he looked. He was deliberately antagonizing all of them in different, subtle ways. He stepped on Derek’s guilt over the death of his family, he irritated Laura by upsetting her kids, he picked at Stiles’ self-confidence by calling him retarded. But as a method to destroy a pack, it was destined for failure. Talia would sooner cut him out – and lose Cora if it really came to that – than allow her pack to self-destruct.

Well, there’s one thing he can do with this new information, he supposes. Seth had stolen Peter’s fingerprints; he can do the same.

Dinner that night is quiet and subdued. Things aren’t going well in Santa Rosa. Talia is frustrated and snappish. Aaron is trying to soothe her extremely ruffled feathers. Cora is in one of her listless phases and that’s making Derek moody. Laura is distracted by the kids, who are affected by the atmosphere and whining a lot.

Stiles makes Seth clear the table after dinner and then grabs a few of the things that he’s touched. He heads down to the police station. His father is working, but he’s out in the field, which is good. Several of the deputies give him the side-eye, but nobody actively protests as he fills out all the proper forms, lifts the prints, and submits them just like he would if he were actually a cop.

He’s on his way home when his phone rings. It’s a number he doesn’t know, so he answers it with some trepidation. “Hello?”

“Ah, hello, Stiles? It’s Duke.”

“Oh, hey,” Stiles says. “What, uh, what can I do for you?”

“Listen, I was wondering if there was any way – I know it’s rather an imposition and you must be
quite busy, given the circumstances – but one of the cases I sent you, the trial has been bumped up to next week. They decided to fast track it because the health of one of the witnesses is deteriorating. Is there any way you could take a look at it right away?”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Stiles says. “Yeah, no problem. I mean, I’ll do my best, at least. Which one was it?”

They chat about the case for a few minutes, and then Duke says, “Thank you. For everything, of course. There are a lot of people you’ve helped quite a bit, you know.”


He hangs up and stares out his car window for a few minutes.

“Jesus,” he says. “Duke, you might be on to something.”

He drives home as fast as he can, responds briefly to his father’s greeting, and bolts up to his room. He logs on to the WLO support group. He has two screennames he uses there – the fake one he normally posts under, and the moderator name that’s his own. He’s used it on a few occasions to break up fights or answer questions, often enough that his presence is known and it’s been verified that it’s really him. He takes a deep breath and starts a new discussion.

‘Stiles here – need a favor’ is the topic line.

It takes two minutes for twenty people to ask what he needs.

Five minutes for him to find someone who knows someone who can actually grant the favor.

Twenty before he’s on the phone with that person, making sure they’ve got all their ducks in a row.

Thirty before it’s done.

“Damn, crowdsourcing really works,” he says to his computer, and calls Talia.

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Stiles is a little disconcerted the next day when he leaves the school and sees his father’s cruiser sitting in the parking lot. “Hey, uh, hey Dad,” he says, idling by the door, uncertain. His father gives him an unimpressed look and points at the seat. Stiles winces and gets in. The sheriff starts driving so they can talk in privacy.

“Okay,” he says, “talk. How’d you do it?”

“Do what?” Stiles asks, keeping his voice innocent. His father gives him a five-hundred-percent done look. “Uh, is my father asking this question or the sheriff?”

“Let’s start with your father and see how it goes from there,” Tom says. He taps at the steering wheel as he pulls up at a stop sign. “How did you get someone to confess to a murder that I’m ninety-eight percent sure they didn’t commit?”

Stiles sighs. “I asked nicely.”
His father gives him another annoyed look, then sees that he’s not joking. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” Stiles says. “I signed on to the WLO support group and asked for volunteers. Danny’s going to erase all the traces of the conversation for me.”

There’s a long silence. Tom continues to tap at the steering wheel. “You just . . . asked an innocent person to volunteer to spend their life in prison.”

Stiles pushes both hands through his hair. “Sarah’s sister was killed in attack orchestrated by the WLO and carried out by Kate Argent. Peter killed Kate and I exposed the WLO, so, yeah. She said she would die for us if I asked her to, and she meant it. She won’t face the death penalty the way Peter would have, because she’s human. And if we can manage to figure out who actually killed Gerard Argent, she won’t serve any jail time beyond however long that takes us.”

“Jesus,” Tom says. “Witness tampering, perjury, we could probably add in evidence tampering because I’m sure you told her all about the crime scene so she would know what to say . . .”

Stiles says nothing for a long minute. “Dad,” he says, “I did what I had to do, to protect the pack. If I’m going to be the Left Hand, I . . . sometimes I’ll need to do stuff like that. I’m not going to ask you to like it. Just don’t stop me.”

“Look, kid,” Tom says. “We need to talk about this whole Left Hand thing. Because it seems to me that Peter’s kind of bushwhacked you into this.”

“He just asked me to look into a few things, that’s all.”

“He asked you?” Tom says. “Or he told you?”

“Well, he didn’t need to tell me,” Stiles says. “I mean, I was already doing it. So, it just kind of happened.”

Tom sighs again. He pulls over and rubs a hand over his face. “Stiles, I’m not stupid. I know that you’ve got a devious streak to you and a willingness to bend the rules that . . . really, that you got from your mother. I can look the other way sometimes, maybe even most of the time. But I’m worried about the effect that it’s going to have on you. You’ve been tired a lot lately, you’ve been avoiding me and Derek, don’t think that we haven’t noticed. This isn’t good for you.”

“I’ll handle it,” Stiles says.

“See, that, that right there, is what I’m worried about,” Tom says. “You did this last time, too. You felt like you had to handle everything on your own instead of asking for help.”

“Okay, well, if I need help, I’ll ask for it,” Stiles says. “I just did ask for it. That’s how I’m getting Peter out of prison.”

“Yeah, well, I’m going to have some words with Peter,” Tom says, “because he has no right to push you like this.”

“He just – he wants what’s best for the pack, and he’s trying to help me, to help me learn the ropes –”

“Can we take a step back, Stiles?” Tom asks. “Can we remember that Peter has a wealth of issues that have nothing to do with you or with anything that’s currently going on? I know that he’s your friend, and God, kid, I don’t want to take your friends away. I know that he was one of the first to welcome you into the pack and that meant a lot to you. But he’s not stable. He’s not sane. And you
– you’re like him in some ways, I don’t mean that as a bad thing, and you’re like Olivia was in some ways, and I know that he thinks of you as a son. But don’t let him make you into something you’re not. Can you promise me at least that much?”

Stiles nods. “Yeah. Because, you know . . . I went out and found a volunteer, I made sure they understood that I wouldn’t necessarily be able to get them out of it, made sure they were willing. Peter would frame an innocent person without their consent if he needed to, if it was for the pack . . . I could never do that.”

The sheriff breathes a sigh of relief. “Okay. I’m glad to hear you say that, at least.”

“I just . . . I hope I know what I’m doing,” Stiles says, and laughs a little.

Tom sighs and pulls the car back onto the road. “When is Peter getting home, then?”

“We’re not sure.” Stiles rubs his hands over his thighs nervously. “Sarah went in this morning. Talia’s been on the phone all day, she’s been texting me updates. She thinks she’s going to have to go down there. The DA doesn’t want to release him because he says that he still might be culpable. I mean, I think they suspect that Sarah’s confession is faked, and they want to keep him in jail just because.”

“Hnh. Any ideas on how you’re going to handle that?”

“I’m not,” Stiles says. “That’s Talia’s job. And Aaron’s, probably. If the DA won’t agree to release him, they’ll take it to the press, ask them to justify why they’re keeping a werewolf in prison for a crime that someone else has confessed to.” He shrugs. “I won’t be much involved, probably, but Talia wants it done as quick as possible. I guess she visited Peter last night and he’s not doing very well.”

“How so?” Tom asks.

“It’s hard for him to be split up from the pack,” Stiles says. “I mean, it’s hard for any werewolf, but even more so for Peter, because he’s so unstable to begin with. It’s one thing when he goes on one of his little adventures, but – being taken away like this – she says he hasn’t – responded well.”

Tom sighs. “Gonna be a hell of a long week,” he agrees, and Stiles just gives a mirthless laugh of agreement.

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It takes three days to get Peter out of prison, and it doesn’t go as smoothly as anyone would have liked. The police in Santa Rosa try to say that they’re going to continue to hold him until they’ve verified Sarah’s story. Charges aren’t being dropped, Peter could still be complicit, et cetera. Sarah insists that she was working alone, and thanks to Stiles, she has information about the crime scene that nobody outside the police or the murderer should have had.

Part of the problem is that they still don’t know which alpha gave Gerard the bite. Sarah deals with this by simply refusing to say. She won’t incriminate her partner, she’s not a snitch, but she wasn’t about to let an innocent man rot in jail for her crime. She simply tells part of the truth: her sister was killed by the WLO, and she had decided to take revenge for it. Peter Hale is a hero for killing Kate, she says, and that’s why she decided to turn herself in.
When the police and the prosecutors in Santa Rosa continue to stonewall, Aaron takes it public. He publishes a story about it and it spreads through the internet like wildfire. The general public, as capricious as ever, is just as quick to demand Peter’s release as they were his execution. Twenty-four hours later, Peter is released on his own recognizance. But the charges stand, the district attorney insists, and Peter will serve trial for them. He’s fitted with a GPS anklet that’s got silver on the inside so it can’t be removed by a werewolf, and told not to leave Beacon Hills.

Nobody is exactly happy about this, but it’s clearly the best they’re going to get. If nothing else, it buys them time to figure out who really killed Gerard.

Talia drives down to pick him up. Then she calls Derek from the road and tells him she wants it to be a ‘family only’ night. Peter is confused and disoriented, and she thinks he’ll settle down better without a lot of stress. Of course, Derek suspects that what she actually means is ‘without Seth’, because God only knows how Peter is going to react when he sees the dudebro again.

But he does as she asks. He calls Cora and tells her it’s family only night, and she agrees without protest. Hopefully some time away from Seth will do her some good. Then he calls Stiles. It’s the middle of the school day, and he’s not expecting Stiles to answer his phone. “Aren’t you in class?” he asks.

“You caught me in between,” Stiles says. “What’s up?”

Derek gives his phone the profound side-eye. He doesn’t hear the sort of background noise he would expect if Stiles were in the hallway between classes. He’s not quite sure how to tackle this. If Stiles isn’t in school, where is he? Why does he have the sinking feeling that this isn’t the first lie that Stiles has told him lately?

Regardless, it’s not something he’s going to get into over the phone. They can talk about it later. So instead he says, “Mom’s going to be bringing Peter home this afternoon. She thinks it’d be better for him if it’s quiet, so, pack only.”

“I was going to make beef carbonnade,” Stiles says anxiously. “It’s one of his favorites.”

“He probably won’t eat much tonight,” Derek says, “but I’m not telling you because you’re not invited. You’re pack, you’re the denmaker. I just need you to pass along to Scott and the others.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, relieved. “Okay. So, just Hales and me?”

“Right,” Derek says, then adds, “but hold off on the beef . . . whatever. Something simple would be better.”

“Oh,” Stiles says. “Yeah, okay. I’ll see you around five thirty?”

“I might take off a little early. Mom said she’d be home with Peter around five.”

“Oh. Love you,” Stiles says.

“Love you too,” Derek says, and hangs up. He goes back to lugging around small trees. He’s promised his boss that he’s going to get all the spring trees set up outdoors, since spring is coming and people are going to be looking for that sort of thing now. He realizes abruptly that it’s April now, that Stiles’ birthday is just around the corner. He’s going to be eighteen. That’s no small thing. Although Sheriff Stilinski has kindly been looking the other way and pretending they’re not having sex, Stiles’ eighteenth birthday means it’s going to be time to redo his pack contract. Time for him to sign it as his own person, rather than a minor.
He’s obviously going to have to find something amazing to give Stiles for this occasion (beyond the obvious ‘night of sexual servitude’), and wonders if he plans on doing his yearly excursion to Dave and Buster’s for pizza and video games, or something more exciting. He makes a mental note to ask him. He wouldn’t put it past Stiles to have completely forgotten about his birthday in the excitement of everything else going on.

Derek has given the sudden emergence of Sarah and her confession a pretty hard side-eye, but all the pieces fit together. If there was outside influence, he doesn’t see it. Frankly, he wants Peter out of jail, so he doesn’t really care who this lady is or whether or not she’s telling the truth.

By four thirty, the last of the trees are moved. He tells his boss that he’s going to come in a half-day on Saturday to get the landscaping finished up, and he agrees. Then he heads home. Stiles is in the kitchen, arranging little English-muffin pizzas on a tray that he’s putting together. Derek drops a kiss on the top of his head and jogs upstairs to take a shower.

He comes back down to find Cora setting the table while Laura wrangles the kids. Cora looks better today than she has in several weeks. Derek knows she’s been seeing Seth less lately, just because of everything going on and general time constraints, and he thinks it’s improved her a great deal. He helps set the table and dreams about the day that they’ll be able to punt Seth’s ass out for good.

Stiles has turned dinner into something fun, which should help keep the tone light even if Peter isn’t feeling well. He’s constructed the basic pizzas with sauce and cheese, and then made little stations for things like pepperoni and bacon, green and yellow pepper, mushrooms and olives. Each person can take as many basic pizzas as they like and then do the toppings to their liking.

He’s just setting out the last bowls when they hear Talia’s car outside. All of them tense, and it takes effort not to run for the door. Talia comes in a few moments later, and they can hear Peter’s heartbeat behind her. He smells wrong, distant, layered over with scents of other people and other places. He doesn’t look much better when he comes in, unshaven and disheveled and with dark smudges underneath his eyes. Talia has a hand on his shoulder, guiding him into the kitchen.

There’s a moment of tense silence while nobody moves and nobody knows what to say. Take it slow, their rational minds suggest, while instinct prompts something entirely different. Then, abruptly, Cora makes a noise like a wounded animal and throws herself onto her uncle. He opens his arms and catches her, lifting her a little off her feet as she buries her face in his shoulder. That reaction from him releases the rest of them from their paralysis. Moments later, Peter is three-deep in werewolves. Laura is crying a little as she lifts up the two kids so they can get in to give him a kiss. Aaron has an arm around them and is squeezing Cora against her uncle. Derek shamelessly rubs his scent all over Peter’s hair, trying to erase the smell of the prison.

Stiles is the last to approach, but that’s more out of practicality than of reticence. A bunch of emotional werewolves could literally break him, so he waits until they’ve gotten the worst of it out of their system. Then Derek pulls him in to a hug, and Peter rubs a hand over Stiles’ hair, leaving it in lopsided spikes. “Thank you, Stiles,” he says.

“Yeah,” Stiles says, with an awkward smile. “No problem.”

Derek frowns slightly, recalling Peter’s words in the prison. “For what?” he asks.

“So who’s hungry?” Stiles asks loudly, at the same time. Derek sighs and decides to let it go for the time being. He’s not about to get in an argument with Stiles in front of everybody, especially not while Peter is so fragile and Cora is still quietly blubbering in her corner and hoping that nobody notices. They start assembling pizzas and things become loud and jovial, almost too much
so, like the volume has been turned up too far and Derek is left wincing with it.

Peter himself is quiet. He protests as Talia steers him into a chair, saying he really just wants a shower and a nap. “You need pack now,” Talia says, in a no-nonsense sort of voice, and sits him down. “What do you want on your pizza?”

As Derek had predicted, Peter doesn’t really seem hungry. Talia makes him two of the little pizzas anyway, and badgers him into eating them. They talk about inconsequential things. Talia has also remembered that Stiles’ birthday is coming up soon, and asks if there’s anything he wants. Stiles isn’t secure enough in their relationship to ask Talia for anything, so he just says, “surprise me.”

Derek wonders if he’s going to invite Isaac to whatever birthday party he decides to have. That would certainly make things interesting. But he’s not about to ask in front of Cora, so he keeps his mouth shut. “Anything you want from me?” he asks.

“Nothing I can ask for in polite company,” Stiles says with a leer. Cora giggles, a sound which makes everyone in the room smile, even Peter.

Jonathan cleans up the kitchen while Talia shepherds everybody else into the living room to watch a movie. “You choose, Peter,” she says. “Aaron can watch the kids if you want something that wouldn’t be appropriate for them.”

“Mm,” Peter says, his gaze a little distant. Then he says, “The Italian Job.”

That’s no surprise; most of Peter’s favorite movies are about smart criminals. Aaron gathers the children up and takes them upstairs. Tyler whines a bit because he wants to ‘play with Unca Peter’ but it’s late, and Laura promises him ice cream the next day if he’s good. Peter settles on the sofa between Talia and Derek. Stiles is in Derek’s lap. Cora hesitantly creeps over and sits at Peter’s feet, pressing her back into his legs. Laura puts the movie on. Not that it matters; Peter is asleep ten minutes in, curled up with his face pressed into his sister’s shoulder.

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Everyone is worried about how Peter will respond to Seth’s reentrance into the pack. It takes all of them off guard when he just smiles at Seth and says, “I missed you most of all, scarecrow.” When Seth tries to pass off his absence as a joke, Peter just shakes his head and says, “Infant, please. You’re going to have to get up a lot earlier in the morning than that.”

Seth doesn’t respond to this not-so-subtle jibe, Aaron hastily changes the subject, and things subside back into an uneasy peace.

“So, Stiles, have you decided yet what you want to do for your birthday?” Talia asks over brunch on Sunday, smiling at the teenager.

“Uh, yeah, I figured I’ll just do my annual bash at Dave and Buster’s,” Stiles says.

Seth snorts. “Lame,” he says.

“Nobody asked you, fucktrumpet,” Stiles says, losing his temper. “You’re not invited, so what the hell do you care?”
Derek chokes and mouths ‘fucktrumpet?’ at Stiles, who just gives a remorseless little shrug. Cora, for her part, fidgets and plays with her fork. “I guess I’ll . . .”

“You’re still invited,” Stiles says, “and you’d better show up. Capisce?”

“Sure,” she murmurs.

Later, after they’ve split up for the day, Stiles admits that he had planned to do the whole uninvitation a little more delicately. “He just said that and I lost my temper, ugh,” he groans, flopping onto Derek’s bed. “Oh well, at least I got it done. I hope Cora still comes. Maybe it’d be better if she didn’t. I did want to invite Isaac, so . . .”

“That might be a good place and time to get it done, though,” Derek says. “A lot of other people, a lot of space, so they won’t be pushed together if there’s any sort of . . . weird reaction.” Not that he has any idea what to expect. But he feels better about this because he’s ninety percent sure that Stiles has no idea what to expect, either.

“I should probably give him a call,” Stiles says, rolling over and fumbling for his phone. “It’s so weird that he doesn’t have a cell phone. Drives me nuts sometimes, to be honest. Be easier if I could just text him.” He taps the screen a few times and puts the phone up to his ear.

It rings three times, and then a gruff, almost angry sounding voice picks up. “H’lo?”

“Hi, is Isaac there?” Stiles asks.

“He’s busy. Who’s this?”

“Uh, it’s Stiles. A friend from school. And, you know, lacrosse,” Stiles says, since he’s pretty sure that Isaac has used ‘friends from lacrosse’ as an excuse. “Can I leave my number?”

“He’s grounded,” Lahey snaps, “so don’t bother.”

“Oh,” Stiles says. “Well, if you could – ” he starts, and then there’s a click. He blinks at the now-disconnected phone. “Wow.”

“Yeah, that didn’t go well,” Derek agrees, frowning.

Stiles groans and rolls over. “So Isaac’s dad is a jerk. That’s not exactly news. I mean, he seems kind of like an asshole just from the way Isaac describes him. But it’s probably all for the best if Isaac doesn’t come to my birthday bash anyway. I mean, I think it’d be better to keep him and Cora apart until we know what the fuck is going on, y’know?”

“Yeah,” Derek says, and sighs. “I know.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Stiles has to wait until date night rolls around again to get what he needs done. That’s fine, because it takes some time to get what he needs anyway. He has to order a few bugs from a spy shop online. It would be nice to bug Seth’s phone, but he doesn’t know how. He’ll settle for sticking a bug in his apartment, which he needs to look through anyway, and one in his car.

His original plan to get Peter’s help with this subterfuge hasn’t come to much. Peter is still fragile
from his time away from the pack. He’s easily distracted, and spending long periods of time staring into space while he plays with his wedding ring. Stiles decides that he’s going to have to handle this himself. He needs Seth out of the house sooner rather than later.

Laura and Jonathan are out with friends; Talia and Aaron are going to a concert. Melissa is working a late shift, and Scott is having dinner at the Argent house, something that he does once a month no matter how terrified he is of Allison’s mother. Tom had volunteered to help watch the kids, but then there was an armed robbery in a nearby town and he had gotten called away. Peter has been in his room all day and didn’t even come out for dinner.

Seth is being his usual charming self, and Tyler is being a complete brat because he hates Seth and he’s not old enough yet to understand why that’s not okay. Derek pacifies him by putting on a new nature video about whales. Seth bitches about having to watch it, but settles when Cora does. Since nobody is going to be leaving for a while, Stiles turns to Derek and says, “I think I’m going to make some of those cookies with the raspberry filling. Do you mind if I run to the store?”

“Go ahead,” Derek says absently, keeping an eye on Sylvia as she toddles around her play area. Stiles gives him a kiss on the cheek before he goes into the front hallway and silently picks up Seth’s jacket on the way by. He finds the keys in the pocket as expected, and goes out to the Jeep. Surprisingly, the key ring has seven different keys on it. One is for his car, and Stiles figures two of them are for Seth’s apartment – one for the building and one for the apartment – but what are the others for? A college kid like Seth might still have a key to his parents’ place, but that would only be another two keys, maximum.

It’s about a twenty minute drive over to Seth’s apartment, right by the college. There are a lot of teenagers around and nobody gives Stiles a second glance as he jogs up the stairs and finds the right door. He knocks once, stops, listens. There’s no answer, not that he had expected one, so he inserts the keys and slides inside.

The apartment is just as dudebro-tacular as Seth himself. There’s a sofa and a gigantic television with both an Xbox and a Playstation hooked up to it. There are stacks of movies and video games lying around, and although some of them are what he would expect – sports games, action flicks – there’s some surprisingly highbrow entertainment. Stiles looks through the movies and sees *Memento*, *Fight Club*, and even *Låt den Rätte Komma In*, in its original Swedish.

On the other side of the living room, there’s a desk, computer, and chair. The computer is shut down, so Stiles boots it up. It’s password protected, and after his first two attempts fail, he turns it back off. It’s possible that there would be some response to repeated failures, and he doesn’t want to risk Seth realizing he was there. The desk is otherwise bare. There are no papers or books or anything that might help him figure out what’s going on.

The tiny galley kitchen and the bedroom reveal no secrets to him, and he’s a little disappointed but not particularly surprised. He takes out the two little bugs that he had purchased off the internet and looks around. He doesn’t want either of them near the electronics lest they give some sort of feedback. It’s easy to place one in the bedroom, underneath the lamp. The second goes on the underside of the sofa.

With that, he locks up and heads back to the nearest Wal-Mart, where he has them copy all of Seth’s keys except the car key. Then he goes back to the den. The last bug goes in Seth’s car, underneath the driver’s seat. He walks into the house with the two cartons of raspberries he purchased earlier, feeling nervous, sure that what he’s been up to is plastered all over his face.

“You were gone a while,” Derek remarks, as Stiles heads towards the kitchen.
“Yeah, the first store didn’t have any good berries,” Stiles replies automatically.

He takes another step before he finds Derek’s arm blocking his way. “You’re lying,” he says. “Why?”

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I'm very fond of this chapter. For many reasons. ^_^

By the way, it's very much NSFW. So, so NSFW.

Stiles has only been gone about fifteen minutes before it occurs to Derek that he probably didn’t go to the store. He’s been doing that more and more lately. Wanting to spend time at his own house without Derek there, going on errands by himself. Derek doesn’t know what he’s up to, but after everything that happened the summer before, the idea that Stiles might be throwing himself into danger terrifies him.

So when Stiles comes home and lies to his face, he finally loses his temper. “You’re lying,” he says, blocking Stiles’ way into the kitchen, which isn’t something he thought he would ever do. “Why?”

Stiles blinks up at him, and his face creases in frustration and for a moment Derek thinks he might actually burst into tears. Then he ducks his head and says, “We can’t really . . . talk about this here.”

“Then we’ll go somewhere that we can.” It isn’t exactly an order, but he doesn’t offer a way to refuse or put it off, either.

Stiles licks his lips nervously and looks towards the living room. They’re far enough away that Seth wouldn’t have heard them, although Cora might have. “Do you think Cora can manage the kids for a little while? Last time we tried that, Tyler tried to bite Seth’s nose off.”

“And what a tragedy that was,” Derek replies dryly. “Yes, I think she . . .” He forcibly puts a stop to that sentence before he can remark that Cora might be glad to have an excuse to focus on the children so Seth will stop pawing at her and simply says, “Yes.”

“Okay.” Stiles turns and heads out the back door. He closes it behind them but doesn’t walk away from the house, not wanting to get too far in case some sort of disaster strikes while they’re gone. He still won’t quite look at Derek. “I can’t . . . I can’t tell you, Derek. I’m doing some stuff for Peter and he told me to keep it secret.”

Derek clenches his jaw and tries not to be angry. “I thought we agreed that there wouldn’t be secrets between us.” He chews on his words for a few moments. “I know that you might not always be able to tell me everything, but lying to me?”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles says, practically choking on the words. “I’m really sorry, Der. I’m sorry.”

Derek can’t exactly stand up in the face of that, so he opens his arms to offer a hug. Stiles steps into it gratefully, pressing his face against Derek’s shoulder. “Are you . . . okay?”

“No,” Stiles says. “No, I’m not okay. I’m tired and I have nineteen things on my plate and I hate
lying to you and to my dad, I failed my last history test and lost twenty points on my biology paper because I turned it in late and my dad’s going to flip his shit when he finds out, I’ve broken like four different laws just tonight and I can’t do this anymore.”

Derek pulls him in and buries his nose in Stiles’ hair for a few moments, trying to figure out what exactly is going on. He’s starting to get some ideas, and he doesn’t like any of them. “What exactly is Peter’s logic for this?”

Stiles sniffs a little and then looks appalled at himself. “Just that I need to learn to keep secrets, if I’m going to be the pack’s Left Hand.”

“Okay,” Derek says. He rubs his hand up and down Stiles’ spine for a few moments before speaking. “One. None of us are saying you have to be the Left Hand, if that’s not what you want. Two, and here’s something Uncle Peter hasn’t told you, is that if you are the Left Hand, you make your own rules. Yes, part of it is keeping the pack’s secrets and keeping some things from the alpha to keep everybody safe, but . . . if you can’t function by yourself, then you have to find a way to cope. Someone you can share with, or decides what you can and can’t share with others.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. He gives a little hiccup and says, “Do you want to come see my crime wall?”

Derek smiles, just a little, his lips pressed against Stiles’ temple. “I would love to see your crime wall.”

Stiles sighs and rests his weight against Derek more fully. “I guess we should wait until after date night is over.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Derek says. “I recall promises being made about the next time you had a crime wall. Something about tearing your clothes off?”

At this, Stiles manages a smile. Then he pulls back and says, “Yeah, but if Laura gets back and finds out that her children have destroyed Seth in our absence . . . who am I kidding? She’d probably give us a medal.”

“She’ll give them a medal,” Derek agrees.

“Medals for everybody!” Stiles says, and pulls away, though he twines his fingers through Derek’s, and heads back inside. As Derek had predicted, Cora is sitting on the floor helping Tyler do a puzzle while Seth sits on the sofa and plays on his phone.

At least Seth isn’t actually bitching. Derek decides to test the theory. He sits on the floor with Tyler and Cora. “We were thinking of maybe making ourselves scarce for a little while,” he says, wondering if she’ll jump at the chance.

But she shows the same lacklustre response that she’s given to everything lately. “Oh,” she says. “Okay.”

“Bow chicka wow wow,” Seth chimes in.

Derek rolls his eyes at Seth, but lets it go other than that, although it does grate a little that Seth is right. “Don’t wait up,” he says, and then pulls Stiles out of the house. They make the drive back to the Stilinski house in silence. Stiles is brooding. There’s a sneaking edge of relief to his scent, but it’s overpowered by waves of anxiety and guilt. Derek decides to wait on saying anything until he’s seen the crime wall. Then at least there will be something to talk about. He hopes.

He’s a little surprised when Stiles heads into the guest room instead of his own. But it’s easy to see
why. The posters have completely taken over the room. The first, directly ahead on the far wall, was originally titled ‘Seth Freudenberg’. That’s been crossed out in red marker, and written below it is ‘Seth Freudenberg does not exist’. A second poster right next to it is titled ‘who is the dudebro?’ Both posters have a variety of writing in different colors below their headings.

A third poster, on the next wall, is titled ‘who killed Gerard Argent?’ and is similarly filled with smaller text. Between those two posters is one that says ‘connection’ at the top, which simply has a large, decorative question mark on it. There’s a number of smaller posters with less information on them. Derek sees Isaac on one that’s designated ‘orange-bracelet-curly-hair’ and another is set aside for some members of the WLO that he recognizes from after Kate’s death.

“Well,” Stiles says with a huff, cramming his hands down into his pockets. “Here it is.”

Derek stares for a long minute, taking the information in a piece at a time. “Seth doesn’t exist.” He falls quiet for a moment. “That’s simultaneously one of the most comforting and most disturbing things you could have told me.”

“How so?” Stiles asks.

“Well, disturbing for the obvious reasons, like he’s in our house with my sister. But comforting because it means he can’t push for a contract. He can’t force us to make it legal.”

“Oh, I guess that’s true,” Stiles says. “I mean, he still could, but it wouldn’t be valid. It’s a good fake identity, though. I mean, all the documents are there, SSN is valid, all the things we checked into on our first and even second sweep checked out.”

“Stiles?” Derek interrupts, when it’s clear that Stiles is gearing up to talk for a while. “Why are we still wearing clothes?” He backs Stiles up to the wall and incidentally to the center poster. “I believe promises were made.”

“Yeah, that you would tear my clothes off,” Stiles says, smirking, “so if I’m still dressed, it’s clearly your fault.”

“Well, I’ll have to rectify that immediately,” Derek says, sliding his fingers up underneath Stiles’ T-shirt and pushing it over his head. He keeps Stiles pinned to the wall, nuzzling his face into the crook of his neck, enjoying his scent as the lust starts to roll off of it. There’s nothing better in the world. He mouths wetly at the teenager’s neck and collarbone, and Stiles moans and threads his fingers into Derek’s hair.

They’re not in a rush, and Derek is really in the mood to savor this, to reward every inch of his beautiful mate for being the amazing creature that he is. He leans in for a kiss, hot and messy, his hands rubbing up and down Stiles’ sides. Stiles groans and yanks Derek’s shirt off so he can return the favor, and drops it to the side. Derek doesn’t protest, but doesn’t really react, either. He’s busy leaving little love marks along the line of Stiles’ collarbone, listening to the pace of his breathing kick up a notch.

“Oh,” Stiles says, as one of Derek’s thumbs flicks over a nipple. “Ohhhh. Fuck. I love you.”

“Love you too,” Derek murmurs into his shoulder. He bends his head down a little so he can put his mouth on the scar that the bullet left, pressing a soft kiss into it. The back of Stiles’ head hits the wall with a muffled thump, and Derek drops to his knees. “I’ll always love you,” he says into the soft skin of Stiles’ abdomen, licking a circle around his navel. Stiles makes a strangled little noise as Derek starts working on the button and fly of his pants.
“You,” Stiles pants, “you know you don’t have to.”

“I want to,” Derek says, rubbing his cheek against the hard bulge of Stiles’ cock. “I always want to. I could spend eternity doing this.”

“Fucking fuck,” Stiles agrees, as Derek starts mouthing at his pants, drawing the zipper down with his teeth. The older man eases his pants and underwear down and out of the way, and he kicks one foot to get them free. Derek drops little nips and kisses along the inside of his thighs. He can feel Stiles’ legs start to tremble, the muscles twitching underneath his cheek, and gets his hands underneath Stiles’ ass, holding him up against the wall.

“Oh, God,” Stiles says, once Derek is completely supporting his weight. “That is unfair, you’re so fucking strong, do you have any idea what that does to me – ”

His voice breaks and cracks a little when Derek’s mouth meets his cock, just a lick here, a kiss there, until he’s completely out of his mind. He has Derek’s hair twisted between his fingers and is just gasping out little pleading noises.

“Look at me,” Derek says into his hip. “Watch me.”

“Hnnnng,” Stiles says, but he forces himself not to lean on the wall, letting Derek support him, looking down so he can see what Derek’s doing to him. Derek takes him all the way in and he can feel it from his curled toes to the top of his head. And Derek is looking up at him, his amazing eyes fixed on Stiles while he does it, and the love and desire on his face nearly has Stiles coming on the first suck. He doesn’t though, because he’s had some practice at this, and he just winds up curled around Derek, pulling at his hair and moaning, because Derek loves how loud he is, and finally he’s just gasping ‘oh, oh, oh’ over and over again until he loses control and comes down Derek’s throat.

Either minutes or weeks later, he figures out he’s lying on the floor while Derek nuzzles his throat and tells him how amazing he is right into his ear. He pets somewhat ineffectually at Derek’s back and shoulders until his muscles remember how to work again. Then he kisses Derek while his hands work on the other man’s belt. “Do you want me to suck you off?” he asks, getting his pants off. “What do you want, tell me, I want to do what you want.”

Derek’s breath is heavy, his teeth a little less gentle as he nips at Stiles’ throat. “I want you to ride me,” he says.

“Oh, God, yes,” Stiles agrees, arching his neck. He’s still soft, but he doesn’t think he will be for long. God bless the refractory period of a teenager.

“Is there anything – ”

“Not in here,” Stiles says, and Derek is on his feet.

“Don’t move,” he says to Stiles. “Stay just like that.”

“Okay,” Stiles agrees, since he’s not really inclined to move anyway, and he just lays there all loose and tingly until Derek comes back with the lube. Derek just watches him for a moment, and Stiles preens, giving a luxurious stretch while Derek’s eyes drink it all in. His self-esteem might still need a lot of work in some areas, but when it comes to how much Derek wants his body, he’s been completely convinced.

He’s also grabbed the pillows off Stiles’ bed, so he can lie down but still be propped up a little. Stiles straddles him and goes in for another kiss. He winds up leaning over with his forehead
pressed against Derek’s collarbone, moaning and squirming while Derek eases him open. “Fuck, I’m gonna come again before we can even get started, if you keep that up,” he gasps out.

“What a tragedy that would be,” Derek murmurs, but he pulls back. Stiles eases himself down, slow and careful, because he doesn’t have a lot of practice at this yet. Derek puts his hands on Stiles’ hips to steady him while he gets comfortable, making little, barely-there rocking motions. Derek’s eyes flutter closed as he struggles for self-control. “You’re so good, you’re amazing,” he breathes out. “I don’t tell you that enough.”

“You tell me that every day,” Stiles says, his hands clenching down on Derek’s biceps as he starts to move a little more freely.

“Still not enough,” Derek replies.

“You – you’re such a sop,” Stiles says, grunting as Derek starts to move with him. “Don’t let the guys at work know. You’ll lose all your street cred. I don’t – oh,” he chokes out, as he grinds down on a particularly well-placed thrust. And then even he can’t talk anymore and there’s nothing else except the sound of their breathing and an occasional moan or profanity, and he stops trying to be careful and just goes for broke. He can feel Derek’s fingers digging into the small of his back, and he’s pretty sure they’re going to leave bruises and he doesn’t even care because the older man is writhing and shuddering and Stiles tries to hold still as he comes. Derek lets out a gasping little groan of release, and Stiles leans down and kisses him. Derek’s hand wraps around his cock and he’s so startled that he bites down on Derek’s lip, and then he’s coming all over the space between them, and they’re both going to be a sticky mess and Stiles is more in love than ever.

~ ~ ~ ~

Tom isn’t one hundred percent thrilled when he gets to the Hale house after work and finds that Stiles isn’t there. Talia is home by then, making a fresh pot of tea in the kitchen. She greets Tom and then says, “Oh, I’m not sure where they went, actually. Cora says they left at about eight thirty, citing a need for ‘privacy’. I assumed they went back to your place.”

“Well, I came straight here, so that’s the likely explanation, yeah.” Tom frowns. It isn’t like Stiles to ditch Cora with the kids. He knows that Stiles is stressed; he can’t help but know it. He also knows that Stiles is keeping secrets from him. He had expected Stiles to get better once Peter was back from Santa Rosa, but if anything, he’s getting worse. Something is bothering him, something big, and there’s only one reason Tom can think of that Peter’s presence in Beacon Hills wouldn’t be helping: Peter is refusing to help.

Actually, now that he’s thinking about it, this might be an opportunity in disguise. It’s late; the kids are in bed. Laura and Jonathan are still out on their date, and Cora has left for Seth’s. They have some privacy of their own. “Is Peter lurking?” he asks.

“He’s been in his room most of the day,” Talia says. “Why?”

“I think it’s time I had a little chat with your brother,” Tom says.

Talia grimaces but doesn’t try to argue. She takes out her phone and taps out a message or two. Tom starts helping her unload the dishwasher. Aaron comes downstairs a few minutes later and helps with the tea, taking out a tin of cookies that Stiles had made earlier. Peter wanders in while
he’s doing that, and Talia shoos him into a chair, then sits down next to him, a little closer than usual. “What’s wrong?” she asks Tom, going straight to the point as usual.

Tom glances at her as he settles in the chair across from them, but directs his question to Peter. “You wanna tell me what you’ve dragged my son into?”

Peter arches an eyebrow at him. “What makes you think I ‘dragged’ him into anything?”

“Look, how dumb do you think I am?” Tom asks. “Do you think I don’t pay any attention to my kid at all? I know that you asked him to look into this whole thing with Seth. I sort of interpreted that as ‘stay close to him, try to get him to trip up and reveal something, try to keep Cora’s head on straight’. But I’m beginning to think that I drastically misread the situation.”

“Stiles offered to help,” Peter says.

“Of course he did,” Tom retorts. “He’s seventeen and frustrated and, and an infuriating genius. He’s desperate to prove himself, to prove that he can still solve mysteries and puzzles. It’s my job as his father to make sure he’s keeping his priorities in order, to make sure he’s not taking on more than he can handle, and I can’t do that if you’re going behind my back and undermining me.”

Peter sighs and rubs a hand over his face, and Aaron and Talia exchange an uneasy look but don’t interfere. “Yes, I asked him to try to figure out who was pulling Seth’s puppet strings. I don’t see why you’re treating this like it’s some sort of big deal.”

“Maybe because that’s your job?” Tom says. “I figured he was getting tense because you were gone. Okay. Now you’re back, and he’s still just as tense, which means that you didn’t just ask him, you dumped this on him and you’re not helping him. Why the hell not?”

“Stiles can solve this on his own,” Peter says complacently.

“Of course he can,” Tom retorts furiously, “but he shouldn’t have to.”

Talia clears her throat. “Peter, why are you making Stiles do this by himself? I understand that at first you were out of town conducting on surveillance on Gerard, but that’s done. Why does Stiles feel like he can’t come to you?”

“I . . . have not been well,” Peter says, “since my return. Which you know. Yes, I am recovering from the experience, but I think Stiles doesn’t want to cause me any undue stress.”

“You could try something revolutionary like telling him that you’re willing to help him out,” Tom says. “And that’s not all. He hasn’t told anybody what he’s doing, as far as I can tell – not Scott, not Derek, not me. Which means you told him not to.”

“A Left Hand needs to learn to keep secrets.”

“Oh, Peter,” Talia says, pushing her hand through her hair. “You can’t just . . .”

“Yes, I can. The Left Hand always chooses the next Left Hand and is responsible for his or her training.”

“No,” Tom says sharply. “He’s seventeen, for God’s sake. You can’t make decisions about his life like that. Not when he’s so desperate to prove that what happened doesn’t define him that he would do anything that you asked of him. Including lie to me after all the promises he made about not doing exactly that!”
Peter sighs. He looks somewhat put upon. “Look,” he says, “I understand that you’re concerned. But Stiles is capable of handling a lot more than he gives himself credit for. This is what’s best for him. I don’t –”

“Jesus Christ,” Tom snaps, “stop it! Don’t you talk about what’s best for him! That’s not your decision to make! He’s my son, God damn it! Not yours!”

Stunned silence falls in the wake of this remark. Peter flinches as though Tom had slapped him, and Aaron hastily intervenes. “Okay, tempers are riding a little high, I think we should –”

“No,” Peter says. “He’s right. Stiles isn’t my son, and just because he reminds me of Olivia is no excuse for me to make decisions about his life. I asked Stiles to lie to his father, and that wasn’t okay.” He stands up, carefully, like he’s slowly bleeding to death from some invisible wound. “Excuse me. I . . . have to go.”

They all watch as he walks away. A few moments later, they hear the back door open and shut. “Fuck,” Tom says, rubbing the heel of his hand against his forehead. “I fucked that up, didn’t I.”

“You could have . . . chosen your words a little more carefully,” Aaron says.

Tom sighs and stares in the direction Peter has gone, chewing on his lower lip. Then he glances at Talia. “If I go after him, am I going to get my throat ripped out?”

“Possibly,” she says, her lips pressed into a thin line.

Tom sighs again, nods, and gets to his feet.

“Leave the back door open and hopefully I’ll be able to intervene before he gets that far,” Talia says to his retreating back. Tom nods a little as he makes his way past the dining room and out onto the back porch. He leaves the door propped open a bit and finds Peter sitting on the stairs that led from the porch down into the yard. Without a word, he sits down on the step next to him.

“I’m sorry,” he says, figuring he should open with that. “That was out of line.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Peter says. He gives a shrug and says, “You could have said it differently, but it wouldn’t have hurt any less. Or been any less true.”

“Look,” Tom says, “Stiles loves you. And I’m not saying you can’t have a relationship with him. I would never try to come between him and someone he considers a friend. But . . . he’s struggling right now, for a lot of different reasons.”

“I know,” Peter says. “I was trying to help. I thought – giving him something to do for the pack, showing him that I had faith in him that he could accomplish it, even if he doubted himself – I thought that would make him feel better.”

“Well, I appreciate the thought,” Tom says, “and the faith.”

Peter nods, then says nothing for a very long time.

“Look,” Tom finally says.

“Don’t,” Peter says. “Please don’t. You can never understand.”

Tom sighs. “No, I can’t,” he says. “Not entirely. But there are parts of it that I can understand. Like what it’s like to lose someone you love. What it’s like to have a life full of possibilities suddenly
cut off. No, Claudia wasn’t pregnant when she died. But we had talked about having more children. She used to say ‘one for me, one for you, and one for good luck’. We had decided to space them out about five years. But then when Stiles was five, I had just gotten elected as sheriff, so we decided to wait a couple years. And then she started to get sick. You’re not the only one here who buried his wife.”

Peter looks over at him for the first time, and his gaze falls on the wedding ring that Tom still wears. Then he gives a nod. “I suppose you have a point.”

“I miss Claudia every day,” Tom says. “There isn’t a single day that goes by that I don’t think of her at some point. And when I look at Stiles, I see her. I see her tenacity, her intelligence, her . . . exuberance. I hear her in his laugh. Stiles grows the same flowers and he makes the same cookies and he fidgets just like she did. So trust me, I can understand how you look at him and see the child you might have had with Olivia.”

“But Stiles is not that child,” Peter says, and closes his eyes. “That child is dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Tom says, because there’s nothing else that can be said.

“It was going to be a boy, you know,” Peter tells him, his voice cracking. “She had just had the ultrasound the week before. She . . . she was so excited. We had narrowed it down to three names. She liked Benjamin. We had laughed about it because it means ‘son of the right hand’ in the original Hebrew, and of course that wouldn’t work, so . . . we were probably going to go with either Nathaniel or Dominic. Good names. I liked . . .” His chest is heaving, suddenly, the words coming out raw and broken. “Liked the idea of him being human. Of being able to make the choice himself, when he got older. I was going to . . .” But he can’t talk anymore. He’s breaking down completely, pressing both hands against his face as if he could somehow hide the tears.

Tom has no sooner reached out to put a hand on Peter’s shoulder when Talia comes out of the house. She’s crying, too, tears that have run down her cheeks and smeared her makeup. She kneels down in front of her brother, pulling him into an embrace, making little animal noises that are almost croons. He clings to her, body shaking, for several long minutes.

Finally, inch by inch, Peter pulls himself together. He draws away from his sister and wipes a hand over his eyes. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” he says, voice trembling but in control.

“I’m not,” Tom says. He hesitates, then adds, “You’ve got every right to grieve, you know. Even in front of the rest of us.”

“I suppose.” Peter rubs a hand over his face wearily. “I just thought – if Stiles could solve this, could see that I believed that he could, then maybe he would learn to believe in himself again. I never expected it to be so complicated. But I still think he can do it, you know.”

“I know,” Tom says. “Hell, I’m not faulting your logic, and I’m not blaming you for getting arrested. I’m just saying – he’s pushing himself too hard, and when he hits roadblocks, he gets upset, convinces himself that he is the reason he’s failing, not outside forces. Just let him know you’re around to help. Okay?” he says, and Peter nods. “Oh, and don’t ever tell my son to keep secrets from me again. Or I’ll kick your ass.”

Peter gives him a sideways look and then a slight smile. “You know, I truly believe you could.”

“Damn right,” Tom says, and offers Peter a hand up. After a moment, Peter takes it.
Stiles is the first to come out of the post-sex haze. He starts to wiggle a little, contently at first, but then more restlessly as the minutes trickle by. His scent starts to get that edge of anxiety to it again, and Derek nuzzles at the skin underneath his ear, trying to get him to settle. He doesn’t. In fact, he does the opposite, sitting up and saying, “I’m thirsty. You want something to drink?”

“I suppose we need clothes for that,” Derek says, but he concedes and sits up.

“Well, I could just grab us something.” Stiles fidgets. “I mean. It’s just us, my dad won’t be home for hours.”

“I’ll go with you,” Derek says. The fact that Stiles hadn’t made any sort of joke in response to Derek’s words is telling. He grabs his underwear and pants off the floor and crawls back into them. Stiles gets dressed as well, and a few minutes later they’re in the kitchen and Stiles starts making them tea. “So,” Derek says, leaning his hip against the counter. “Talk to me. I want to help if I can.”

Stiles pushes both hands through his hair. “I, uh. I’m sorry about lying to you. Really. I knew you wouldn’t be happy, but Peter . . . he told me I had to learn to keep secrets. Obviously I wasn’t at the grocery store. I was actually, uh, planting bugs in the dudebro’s apartment. And car.”

Derek rolls that around in his head. “Okay.” He thinks for another moment, then sighs. “Look, what I’m upset about, aside from the lying, is that you’re unhappy. You can bug Seth’s house all you want. But the secrets are hurting you.”

“It’s not the – it’s that –” Stiles flails for a few moments before he goes still and says, “I’m letting everyone down. I’m letting him down. I’m letting me down. He gave this to me and I can’t solve it. I just can’t put the pieces together.”

“Yet,” Derek says. “And you aren’t letting anyone down.”

“Are you kidding? Cora’s miserable, Peter could be facing the God damned firing squad, my grades are in the toilet after everything that everyone has done to help me –”

Derek interrupts, since Stiles is clearly only winding himself up. “Okay, I’m just gonna say it. Peter shouldn’t have dumped this on you. And once he did, he should have offered to help once it was clear that it was so complicated.”

“It’s not like I’ve been complaining to him,” Stiles says, rubbing one hand up and down his arm. “I mean, I don’t . . . I don’t want to disappoint him. I don’t want him to think I can’t do this, I don’t want to have to go crying to him to bail me out. He gave me this and told me that he believed in me. How can I tell him that I can’t do it?”
“Look, I think you’re smart enough and determined enough to sort it out,” Derek says. “But . . .”
He tries to think, tries to figure out how he should phrase things. “Okay, what does Uncle Peter do?” he finally asks.

“Uh . . . he wanders around being cryptic,” Stiles says.


“I don’t . . . I guess I don’t know?” Stiles says. “I mean, I know that he hasn’t really held down a job since the fire. Didn’t he used to work for your mom at some point? I don’t think he was a lawyer, though.”

“He wasn’t. He did ‘odd jobs’ off the books. So he didn’t have a normal or a time-consuming job before the fire. Being the Left Hand was his job. It still is. What do you do?”

“Go to school,” Stiles sighs. “Fail history.”

“Go to school, do homework, be the denmaker, have friends and a social life, spend time with your father, work on those cases for Duke,” Derek says, and raises his eyebrows. “Are you seeing a difference?”

“Look, you don’t need to tell me I have too much on my plate,” Stiles snaps. “I’m fucking aware, okay?”

“That wasn’t my point at all,” Derek replies. “My point is that you’re trying to do two or three jobs, along with the job of the Left Hand, which is a full time job. You aren’t really falling short, you know? You’re being faced with the basic laws of physics.”

“They transferred me out of physics,” Stiles says glumly. The kettle is starting to whistle. “Hand me the – the hot-grabby-thing.”

Derek tosses him a pot holder. “Well, then, I guess we can blame the school for you not knowing that a person can’t be in two places at once.”

“Yes, it’s all their fault.” Stiles at least sounds somewhat amused as he pours the hot water in the two mugs. “Can we stop with the motivational speeches now? Because I’d really much rather answer your five hundred questions about the dudebro and don’t think I don’t know that you have them.”

“As long as you promise to actually think about what I said. Or at least about what I meant, because I’m pretty sure that I’m a shitty motivational speaker.”

Stiles looks up and smiles slightly as he dunks the tea bag in and out. “I’d rather have your ill-conceived fumbling speeches over someone with a silver tongue. I know you mean every word. And . . . Jesus, I need your help. I can’t handle this on my own anymore.”

Derek lets out a breath, profoundly glad that Stiles had asked. “What can I do?”

“Well, to start with, you can ask me the nine zillion questions I’m sure you have,” Stiles says, his smile becoming somewhat dry. Then he adds, “Maybe it’ll help me to talk it out with somebody, anyway.”

“Okay.” His pleasure, really. He’s aching for answers. “So if Seth the douchebag doesn’t exist, who is he?”
“I have no idea,” Stiles says, starting back up the stairs towards the guest room where his posters are. “All I know is that Seth Freudenberg is an artificially constructed identity. A very, very good fake, but still a fake. As for who the guy really is, I don’t know. I lifted his fingerprints and ran them through – uh, that’s a federal crime, by the way, please don’t mention it to – anyway, no matches.”

“So whoever’s playing the role is either new to crime or really good at crime and has never been caught before,” Derek says. “How’d you figure out he was a fake?”

Stiles chews on his lower lip. “Everything just kept . . . checking out, and checking out, and finally I got sick of dead ends and I went up to the town where he went to high school. I had no idea what I might find, I just wanted to find something. And I didn’t find anything. It’s like, he supposedly won wrestling trophies, right? His name is even in the newspaper articles from back then. But the coach didn’t recognize him. And this was only two years ago, it’s not like we’re talking decades. He’s not in their school yearbook. Stuff like that.”

“Huh.” Derek’s gaze travels over the posters. “Why only bullshit some of the sources? The newspapers, but not the yearbooks?”

“Simple,” Stiles says. “You can’t change a yearbook after it’s physically printed and delivered. All the stuff that’s been changed is stuff that’s open to electronic manipulation. I haven’t gone and looked at the microfilm of the newspapers, only at the articles online. I bet the microfilm would say something different.”

“Then this hasn’t been in the works for years. That . . . makes me feel a little better.”


“The older something is, the further it reaches,” Derek says, thinking of trees. “Or at least has the opportunity to reach.”

Stiles chews on his lower lip. “Fair enough,” he says, “but that makes sense. This has to have something to do with the aftermath of what happened last summer. I mean, with the way the Searching Ceremonies have changed. This is some . . . some new tactic to sabotage them.”

“Or us.” Derek wrinkles his nose at how that sounds. “Not to sound conceited.”

Stiles gives a shrug and says, “I’ve been working off that conceited assumption the whole time, so . . .”

“Okay, at least it isn’t just me.” Derek turns away from the posters. “So did you change your mind? Do you think it’s the Ceremonies that are the target instead of the pack?”

“I think . . . maybe it was a combination of both,” Stiles says. “If someone was doing something to sabotage the Ceremonies, we’d be a good place to start, right? I mean, we’re fucking famous. And they had to know that we’d be reluctant to challenge Cora’s choice because of what happened after your mother rejected me.”

“That does make sense,” Derek says. “And if there are still members of the WLO out there, I can see why they would want to sabotage the Ceremonies. I mean, the whole thing is based on our senses. If those can be manipulated . . .”

“Yeah. The thing is, we still don’t know how.” Stiles pushes his hands through his hair, tugging on it ruthlessly. “Is it magic? Drugs? Some kind of perfume or fragrance?”
“I doubt it’s the latter,” Derek says, “or we’d all smell it, too.”

“But what if they can target a specific werewolf somehow?” Stiles flails as he starts pacing around the room. “We just don’t know. Cora’s behavior is so erratic that I can’t be one hundred percent certain of when he’s doing it. If it’s something that lasts a long time or not. Was it just one magic spell at the beginning? Is it something that has to be repeatedly reinforced? I mean, she goes out with him in the evenings, but that makes sense, they’re a couple, so I don’t know that there’s any nefarious purpose to it when they go out alone.”

“And does it have anything to do with the fact that Isaac rejected her?” Derek muses, glancing at Isaac’s poster. “I think he’s on the level. God, I want him to be on the level. I want there to be someone for Cora once this is all said and done.”

“If he’s been pushed around or threatened, I haven’t been able to find any sign of it,” Stiles says. “Danny keeps an eye on him at school for me, says that sometimes people make fun of him but the bullying never gets that bad, it’s never like it was with me. And my dad talked to the principal and some of the teachers about it, made it clear that looking the other way wouldn’t be tolerated.”

“Okay.” Derek frowns, thinking this over. “I’m assuming that when you were in his apartment, you didn’t see bottles of drugs labeled ‘how I’m messing with Cora’s head’.”

Stiles gives a snort that’s almost a laugh. “Nope. No big folders labeled ‘incriminating evidence’, either. I would’ve made sure to grab ‘em if so.”

“Well, if we think it’s something that he’s consistently doing, not just one spell that they worked at the beginning, maybe we should try to keep them apart for a little while and see what happens.”

“I’ve thought about that, but I can’t figure out how to do it without arousing suspicion,” Stiles says. “And we definitely don’t want Seth figuring out that we’re on to him. He’s the only link we have back to whoever put him up to this . . . presuming that anybody did. I guess it’s possible that he’s working on his own, but I think he’s far more likely to be a pawn.” He sighs again. “I’ve kept track of their evenings out and Cora’s mood – I have fucking charts – but I haven’t been able to find a pattern.”

“Still, it’s something to keep in mind.” Derek mulls it all over, thinks about what’s happened the past couple weeks. “They tried to get Peter out of the way, right? Seth stole his prints so they could be planted at the scene of Gerard’s murder.”

“Yeah.” Stiles quickly explains how he had gotten Peter out of prison, at least temporarily. “But that won’t stick. They’ll keep pushing until they find some reason Sarah can’t be guilty. I think that’s a better avenue of exploration than Seth, actually, but Dad has pretty much forbidden me from getting involved in that investigation, so . . .”

Derek wisely doesn’t give his opinion on Sheriff Stilinski’s edict. “Well, your dad is a good cop. If there’s something to find – ”

“He won’t find it, because the God damned cops down in Santa Rosa are useless,” Stiles says. “They’re convinced Peter did it and they’re not looking at anything else.” He rubs both hands over his face. “And then there’s Seth. At this point, I’d be happy to just break his kneecaps, but Peter doesn’t want to risk that on the off chance that whatever they’ve done to Cora involves having Seth actually be her mate. By hook or by crook. Thus the bugging of his apartment. And I need to get into his computer, too, but I haven’t figured out how to do that yet. Danny’s good with computers. He actually, heh, he actually got arrested the year before last for some sort of hacking prank, I didn’t get the details.”
Derek’s quiet for a minute before saying, “I can keep Seth occupied if you need to get Danny to his computer.”

Stiles nods. “Yeah. Let me think about it. And talk to Danny, obviously, because I can’t exactly spring it on him.”

“Okay.” Derek pulls Stiles into an embrace and breathes in his scent for a minute. “Why don’t we go watch some TV?”

Stiles just leans against him and says, “I have a research paper to write for my expository writing class on werewolves in the media. Three different worksheets for the denmaking class that are overdue. A history test on Monday. I haven’t looked at Duke’s cases in over a week . . .”

“Mm hm,” Derek says. “Why don’t we go watch some TV?”

After a moment, Stiles wrinkles his nose and says, “Okay. That sounds good.”

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The only thing Stiles learns from the bug in Seth’s car is that he has terrible taste in music. He always plays it incredibly loud, with the bass pumped up. Stiles rolls his eyes and writes off the possibility of getting anything useful out of that bug at all.

The one at his apartment proves a little more useful. He never takes Cora there, as far as Stiles can tell. That alone raises an interesting question. If he and Cora don’t go back to Seth’s place after leaving the den, where do they go? How can he possibly find out without getting caught, and in all likelihood getting himself into more trouble than he can handle? He’s not sure of that, but he’s getting sure that he is going to have to find a way. It seems more and more likely that he’s taking her somewhere that some sort of magic can be worked on her, or drugs administered.

Mostly what he hears at Seth’s apartment is more terrible music and the occasional movie. Since no one else is ever there, there’s nobody for him to talk to. But four days after the bug is planted, he overhears a phone call that Seth takes. It’s brief and cryptic, but gives him an avenue to explore. The phone rings twice and Seth picks up with, “Yeah.” There’s a long pause, and then, “yeah, that’d be good. I’m running low.” Another pause. “No, I’m good . . . hey, it’s your dime. Okay.”

That’s it, but to Stiles it all but confirms the fact that Seth is indeed just a plant, and they need to get to the person who made that phone call. He’s not sure what Seth was ‘running low’ on. Money? Whatever drugs he’s giving Cora? Patience?

He hesitantly approaches Peter about this after school one day, while everyone else is busy doing homework or otherwise occupied. He can see that Peter has to put in real effort to draw himself back from whatever dark thoughts he’s lost in. He does it, though, listens intently to Stiles’ summary of what conclusions he’s come to so far. Stiles doesn’t mention the fact that he’s brought Derek in on it. He just doesn’t want to hear Peter say he shouldn’t have told him. He’s not sure if Derek’s right about this whole ‘the Left Hand makes up their own rules’ business, but he doesn’t want Peter to try to cut him off from Derek now.

When he finishes, Peter says, “That . . . that’s very good work, Stiles. You’ve been busy, while I was . . . away.” His gaze goes distant for a few moments. Stiles grits his teeth and wonders if he should try to prod him. Then he gives himself a shake and says, “Go ahead and have your friend
He needs to get Seth’s phone so he can see who made the call he overheard. He’s not a pickpocket, but Tyler gives him an idea the next day when he keeps dropping his sippy cup. When Stiles is carrying a pitcher of iced tea to the table, he ‘trips’ and dumps it all over Seth’s lap. Seth lets out a yelp while Stiles apologizes and feigns frustration with his deficiencies.

“My clothes will probably fit you okay,” Derek says, catching on to what Stiles is up to immediately. He gestures for Seth to follow him. In the fuss, Stiles has no trouble grabbing Seth’s phone, but all he finds out is that it came from a restricted number. He would love to clone it, but he doesn’t have a SIM reader. He makes a mental note to get one. But he notes down the date and time of the call. Maybe Danny will be able to do something with that.

Danny greets him the next day with polite incredulity. “You want me to what?” he asks, and when Stiles brings up the hacking charges, “Dude, I was fifteen! That file was sealed!”

But Stiles wheedles and cajoles and reminds Danny that really, this would be a great way to make up for all the times he witnessed Stiles being harassed and walked away. Danny still carries strong guilt about this, and although Stiles tries not to overplay it, desperate times call for desperate measures.

Danny pushes his hands through his hair. “Look, I know that you probably think that I can just boot up this dude’s computer, wave a magic wand, and get through the security measures. It doesn’t work like that. It’d be way easier to hack into something like his e-mail. Does he have e-mail?”

“I have his e-mail, his phone number, his student ID, and his credit card number – don’t look at me like that, it’s not like I went online and bought myself a bunch of Xbox games. Just – get me whatever you can.”

“Do you have any idea how illegal this is?” Danny asks.

“It seriously can’t be more illegal than half the shit I’ve done in the past two weeks,” Stiles says.

Danny grimaces. “Okay, okay, just . . . don’t let your dad arrest me.”

“Done and done,” Stiles says. He sits down with some of his homework. He has to admit, all of Peter’s commentary aside, that this is a lot easier now that he’s opened himself up to the concept of ‘help’. He can sit and do his school work without stress, knowing that Danny’s going to get him more information. It mellows him out enough that things start to come easily to him again. He blitzes through two biology worksheets, a short history essay, and half of his current project for his denmaking class, which is a recipe book with nutritional guide.

“You said this was a fake identity, right?” Danny finally asks, and Stiles confirms. “He’s really into it.”

“Well, because he’s actually attending his classes and shit,” Danny says. “I mean, he’s actually living as Seth Freudenberg, even when he’s not hanging out with your pack. He’s actually got pretty decent grades, too, and these aren’t exactly blow-off classes. Dude ain’t dumb.”
“Yeah, I’m beginning to figure that out,” Stiles says. “What else have you got for me?”

“His e-mail is a total bust,” Danny says. “The only thing in his inbox or trash is some stuff from Groupon, a couple bulletins from the college, and a newsletter or two from a couple political sites. General ones, no specific causes. Does that meant he hasn’t received other stuff? I don’t know, but if he did, he’s clearing out his trash folder on a regular basis.”

“Okay,” Stiles says.

“I got his phone records for you and they look similarly useless,” Danny continues. “Phone calls back and forth from Cora. And then a call every few days from a blocked number that I can’t trace. It’s probably a burner, and even if I could track it down for you, it wouldn’t do any good. But I’m thinking this is the guy who hired Seth to get in with your pack. And he was hired, I’m pretty sure of that. Check out this stuff from his bank account.”

Danny gestures, and Stiles leans over his shoulder. He skims down the list of purchases, and they all look disappointingly normal. Twenty bucks at a restaurant, fifty at a grocery store, ten at the campus convenience store. There’s only a couple thousand dollars in the account. Every two weeks, he deposits a check that comes from his ‘parents’ for two hundred dollars, presumably his allowance. “Okay, so?”

“Wait for it,” Danny says, and keeps scrolling. Then he taps the screen. “See that? That is a deposit of a thousand dollars in cash.”

Stiles frowns. “The hell? Where did he get that?”

“No clue,” Danny says. “My guess is that this isn’t his real bank account. This is a fake that was set up for Seth Freudenberg. His real bank account is where the money that he’s getting paid is going. If he’s smart, it’s immediately leaving to go to Switzerland or something, but that’s another story. Anyway, see, right before this deposit, he started to get low. There’s this big purchase at Fry’s Electronics. I bet it’s that sweet-ass TV you said he had. He splurged, and then realized he’d let the money get too low. So he just withdrew some cash from his other account and deposited it to cover the difference. We can’t trace the cash, and I’ve got no clue how to find the other bank account, but it’s pretty interesting that it’s there.”

“What about these checks from his ‘parents’?” Stiles asks. “Any way to trace them?”

“Yeah, and it gets us totally nowhere. They come from a bank account registered to Max Freudenberg, who probably doesn’t exist. Every two weeks, someone goes in and deposits two hundred dollars in cash, then writes a check for two hundred dollars to Seth.” Danny shrugs. “They’ve covered their tracks pretty well, but there’s only so much effort they’re going to put in, you know?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Jesus. This is interesting and all, but I don’t know that it actually helps. I don’t know what to do with it.”

“It’s not exactly a smoking gun,” Danny agrees. “Sorry, man.”

“No, it’s fine,” Stiles says, scrubbing both hands through his hair. “Hey, I’ll see you Friday at Dave and Buster’s, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Danny says. “Gonna kick your ass at laser tag.”

“Probably,” Stiles says, laughing.
Stiles decided to do his usual Dave and Buster’s run on Friday afternoon and evening instead of Saturday for denmaking reasons. Friday is take-out night anyway; he won’t be missed. Spending half of Saturday on his birthday party would really screw up his weekend schedule. Friday works fine for everyone else, anyway; they just meet right after school and descend onto the arcade like locusts.

Cora’s in a good mood, which has Stiles relieved. After some debate, he and Derek had put a plan into effect to try to get her into good shape for the birthday party, which involved not letting her be alone with Seth at all during the week prior. They didn’t want Seth to realize what they were up to, so they tried to keep things as natural as possible. Tuesday had been easy enough. That was Stiles’ actual birthday, so there were cake and presents and everyone was at the house until late.

As birthdays went, it sure beat the hell out of the one the previous year. His dad had gotten a new laptop for him, since his old one was starting to run too slowly for his taste. Laura and Jonathan had gotten him a bunch of kitchen gadgets and cookbooks. He got a wolf plushie from Tyler that immediately took up residence on the shelf by his bed upstairs. Talia had gotten him a two-year subscription to the Lexis-Nexis, which made Stiles squeal in delight. “Now I can stick my nose everywhere!” he proclaimed, and Tom groaned.

His gifts from Scott and his other friends would be opened during his party on Friday, so all that was left after that was his gift from Derek. Derek made him close his eyes and led him outside the house to a little patch of land on the south side of the house. “Ta da,” he said, taking his hands off of Stiles’ face. Stiles opened his eyes to see a garden that’s been planted there.

“An herb garden!” he said, delighted. He immediately went to his knees in the dirt to check it out. “Oh my God, the sage smells so good,” he said, burying his face in it. There’s oregano, basil, a huge patch of chives, parsley, and others. “You’re going to take care of this for me, right? Since we’re all familiar with my black thumb.”

“Of course,” Derek said, giving him a kiss.

Stiles returned it enthusiastically, and then they went into the house, where Stiles started telling the others about what was in the garden. Seth opened his mouth and got three words into some derogatory comment about Stiles’ denmaking, but it turned into a yelp where Derek stomped on his foot on the way by.

All in all, it was a good day.

Wednesday was a little more difficult because it was leftover night, but Stiles was determined. If nothing else, it served as a scientific experiment. Would Cora’s mood and attitude improve if Seth didn’t take her out in the evening? So he nabbed her for help with his homework. They shared
history and literature together. Stiles was stressed enough that he didn’t even have to entirely fake his lack of understanding. Cora helped him study and complete some of the worksheets that were behind, helped him sketch out an outline for his paper on The Great Gatsby, patiently worked with him while he screwed up the countries involved in the second world war over and over again. By the time they finished that, it was really too late to take her anywhere.

On Thursday he was getting desperate, and resorted to taking a page out of Kate Argent’s book: he stuck a nail into one of Seth’s tires. When Seth and Cora went out to the car, they found it completely flat. “Must’ve run it over on your way down the road,” Aaron said wisely, eyeing the damage. “Tell you what, rather than put your spare on and risk driving it, I’ll drive you down to the shop and we can pick one up for you.”

Seth put in a token protest that driving on the spare would be fine, but Aaron insisted, and left Cora watching television with the others while he drove Seth to an auto shop. Aaron clearly had a friend there, and ‘got distracted’ chatting with him, and apparently managed to stretch the process of buying a single tire into something that took an entire hour.

By the time they got back, Cora was invested in the movie. Stiles had made sure to put on the longest movie he could think of that she might be interested in; The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo was one hundred and fifty-eight minutes. That would keep her in one place for a while. When Seth tugged on her braid and said, “C’mon, babe, let’s go find some privacy,” she actually snarled at him and told him to sit down and shut up.

Stiles took this as an extremely promising sign. Cora was acting much more like her old self, interacting with their friends at school, showing interest in what he was cooking, and she didn’t seem to be much in the mood for Seth’s bullshit.

So when Friday rolls around, Stiles is in a good mood. Seth has been banned from the proceedings, although Stiles has a suspicion that he’ll try to turn up and whisk Cora away afterwards despite all of their best efforts. He’s determined to party until dawn for this exact reason.

For four years running, the invitees had been solely Scott and Heather. The previous year had expanded on that a little, since he had invited Derek and Cora and Allison. This years puts it to shame, though: Erica and Boyd are coming, Danny’s going to be there, Heather’s bringing her boyfriend. It actually feels like a party for the first time.

And even though he does have a good time playing laser tag and beating Derek’s pants off at the Soul Caliber game and wins enough tickets to build a small Oompa-Loompa, nothing makes him happier than when he sees Cora sitting with Erica and Allison, giggling as they watch Boyd try to teach Scott how to do a handstand and Scott keeps falling over. She looks like herself again.

Derek walks up behind him and wraps an arm around his waist. “Happy birthday,” he says, pressing a kiss into Stiles’ temple.

“It won’t last,” Stiles says wistfully. “Seth will take her out tomorrow, and I don’t think I’ll be able to stop him.”

“Yeah, but . . . at least now we know that whatever he’s doing to her is temporary,” Derek says. “Once we get rid of him, she’ll get better.”

Stiles breathes a sigh of relief. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, you’re right.”
Date night is summarily cancelled the next day because Sylvia has a cold and Jonathan’s on a business trip. Laura says she’ll stay home and watch the kids, but Sylvia has been running her ragged, so the others offer to stay and help. Stiles makes chicken soup and Laura brings a bowl of it up to Sylvia while the others watch Tyler. Cora had called earlier and said she and Seth would be there for dinner, but everyone’s eaten and there still hasn’t been any sign of them.

Tyler tugs on Derek’s pant leg and says, “Can we go feed the squirrels, Unca Derek?”

“Sure,” Derek says, scooping him up. He has several bird and squirrel feeders out in the yard. Scott still laughs and calls him ‘squirrel guy’ at every opportunity, and after some thought, Derek had decided he would just own it.

“We’ll clean up in here,” Scott says, and Allison nods and smiles at them.

Derek grabs Stiles by the hand, not giving him any choice about accompanying him, and they sit down in the yard. It’s early enough that there’s still plenty of light, so he just sits down near one of the feeders and says, “Now remember, you have to be very still, or they won’t come over.”

“Okaaaay,” Tyler says, settling in Derek’s lap. Stiles sits down on the porch of the house. He simply isn’t capable of holding still long enough for wildlife to come over if he’s right there. He’s got his laptop and is working on his homework while he sits there. Tyler squirms for a few minutes but then settles down.

By the time Cora and Seth show up, there’s a chipmunk eating out of Tyler’s hand while several birds are perched on Derek’s shoulders. Seth’s raucous laugh sends them all scattering, and Derek has to resist the urge to get up and just start beating the shit out of him.

“Now that is some Disney princess shit,” he says. Derek rolls his eyes but doesn’t bother to reply. Tyler’s pouting because the animals ran away, and it’s clear that they won’t be coming back any time soon, so it’s best to redirect him before he starts to throw a temper tantrum. “Stiles, didn’t you say there were pudding cups for dessert?”

“Pudding!” Tyler cheers, and everyone heads inside.

Laura comes back down from upstairs and reports that Sylvia’s finally sleeping. Stiles makes her sit down with a bowl of soup; she looks exhausted. “Have you eaten?” Stiles asks Cora, and she looks at him like she’s just waking up from a long nap that did nothing to refresh her.

“We could eat,” Seth says, and it takes a lot of self-control for Derek not to say ‘he wasn’t asking you’. Stiles stays civil, somehow, and gets them a bowl of the soup and some bread while everyone else is having dessert.

Tyler starts making a mess with his pudding and telling his mother all about the animals that he made friends with. Seth loses no time going back to ragging on Derek for his ‘sensitive’ side, and asks, “Should we get you a dress and a tiara?”

Stiles looks up at this and says, “Well, I did warn you about making comments like that, so . . . his dick is just over seven inches long, that’s soft, it gets a bit longer when he’s hard. Uncut, of course. I’m not actually sure werewolves can be circumcised. It’s got this cute little –”
“Oh my God, stop!” Cora protests, clapping her hands over her ears and laughing.

“Seven inches, huh?” Seth says with a smirk.

Derek gives him a look that surely implies how much he doesn’t care about Seth’s opinion of the size of his penis. Stiles rolls his eyes and says, “Average dick length in dudes is like five to six inches,” he says, “so don’t even try to brag about the size of yours in comparison.”

“Bigger isn’t necessarily better,” Laura chimes in. “It’s more about girth than length. You never hear a woman say ‘wow, you’re really pounding on my cervix’.”

Allison giggles. “That is really true,” she says, giving Scott a sidelong glance that makes him blush.

“Maybe some women like a guy who can get to those hard-to-reach spots,” Seth says, and it’s not even a smirk this time, it’s practically a leer that he directs across the table at Cora, who flushes bright red.

Derek’s hand practically moves without his permission. He doesn’t even look at Seth, but just puts his hand on the back of the younger man’s head and slams his face down into the table. He knocks over the bowl of soup and it goes everywhere. “Dude, what the hell was that –”

“You know what that was for,” Derek snaps at him. “Now shut your mouth or I’ll shut it for you.”

The thick tension is broken up by Tyler, who pipes up with, “You’re not supposed to hit!”

Derek forces himself to smile at the toddler. “You’re right, Tyler.”

“Yes, you are,” Stiles says, and gives Derek a look underneath his lashes. “You’ve been a bad boy, Derek . . . you’d better go to our room.”

Derek practically chokes on his pudding at this kink he’s newly discovering. “Are you going to punish me?” he can’t help but ask.

“Oh my God!” Scott says, laughing. “Don’t you dare answer that question, Stiles.”

Derek lifts his hands in surrender and says to Stiles, “I’ll just go to our room and wait, then,” he says, and makes a retreat before things can get worse.

~ ~ ~ ~

Seth’s terrible music has given Stiles one idea, which is to try to stow away on the next trip with Cora. She won’t be able to hear his heartbeat over the crap that Seth plays on his stereo. He thinks about it for a long time before he decides it’s the best idea he has. He’s fairly sure he’s going to get in trouble with eight hundred different people, but he’s going to go for it anyway. The only person he tells is Derek, since they specifically agreed ‘no secrets’. Derek is drastically unhappy with this plan, but sees that he won’t be able to talk Stiles out of it.

“Don’t worry about me,” Stiles says. “I’ll going to bring a few cans of shaving cream and silly string with me, and then if they catch me, I’ll just say I was going to prank him.”

Derek makes a face but doesn’t actively argue. Stiles knows he’s going to spend the entire time
that he’s gone pacing, but there isn’t much he can do about that. After dinner, he says he’s going to
head home so he can get some homework done. He’s stolen one of Cora’s sweatshirts. It doesn’t
remotely fit, but he rubs it over his hair and his T-shirt. That ought to hide his scent from her well
enough. He keeps it with him as he crawls into the back of the car and hides underneath the tarp
that Seth keeps there.

It’s about another twenty minutes before he hears the car door open. He can only assume that both
Seth and Cora get in, but as usual, they’re strangely silent. A moment later, the music turns on, so
loudly that Stiles winces. But it serves its purpose. Cora has no idea he’s there, can’t hear his heart
beating three feet from her.

Seth backs out of the driveway, and the car jostles a little along the old dirt road. Then they hit
smooth asphalt, and Stiles settles in for the drive.

It’s longer than he would have figured: almost forty minutes. He had been counting on taking a bus
to get home, and now he’s not sure what he’s going to do instead. Then there’s the crunch of gravel
and the car comes to a halt. The music stops, and now Seth says, “C’mon,” without his usual
‘babe’ at the end. Two car doors open, and then close.

Stiles counts to fifty before he peers out from underneath the tarp and looks around. There isn’t
much to see. The car is in a driveway of a modern-looking house, all strange angles, cement, and
glass. They’re surrounded by forest on every other side. He can’t see another house anywhere.

He creeps out of the car and looks for any other people. There are none. He steals over to the
mailbox at the foot of the driveway, but it’s unlabeled and empty. Then he heads for the house
itself. He doesn’t see Seth or Cora anywhere. The house is mostly dark. There are only dim lights
in the front room that he can see, and the back is completely dark.

“Well, I’m not going to get anywhere standing around in the forest,” Stiles mutters, steels his
nerves, and heads for the back door. He takes out the keys he copied from Seth and eyes them,
considering. He still can’t see anyone in the house, so he starts trying them. The fourth key slides
into the lock and twists. Stiles prays for quiet hinges and pushes the door open.

Nothing jumps out at him. There are no alarms. He takes off his shoes and carries them, sliding
along the wooden floor in socked feet. He’s grateful for the one lamp in the room that keeps things
illuminated enough for him not to trip over everything. It looks like he’s in a dining room. The
house is really terrible for sneaking, with hardly any furniture and a lot of open space. If he’s seen,
he’s going to be in a lot of trouble.

The kitchen is empty, pristine to the point that he doubts it’s used very much, if at all. He knows
kitchens, knows the way scents and stains set into them regardless of how often you clean. He risks
a glance into a few cupboards and they’re bare. That, along with the lack of furniture, convinces
him that this house isn’t actually lived in. It’s a base of operations, that’s all.

The first floor turns out to be entirely empty. He dithers a moment, trying to decide if he should go
upstairs. But as he passes a doorway, he hears a voice. It’s coming from below him, from the
basement. He goes completely still, pressing himself against a wall like that might help.

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upstairs. But as he passes a doorway, he hears a voice. It’s coming from below him, from the
basement. He goes completely still, pressing himself against a wall like that might help.

It’s a woman’s voice, mellow and rich, and it’s speaking in a language he doesn’t understand and
doesn’t think he’s ever even heard. He could probably identify Spanish or French or even Japanese
from the anime he watches, but it’s none of those. He fumbles for his phone, which he had turned
off for the car ride, and turns the recorder on.

Then, abruptly, she switches to English. “Can you hear me, Cora?”
“I hear you,” Cora’s voice replies. It’s flat, toneless, distant.

“Repeat my words,” the woman says. “Seth is my mate.”

“Seth is my mate,” Cora repeats.

“I would die without Seth.”

“I would die without Seth.”

“I belong to Seth,” the woman says, and Cora repeats. “I know that he’s my mate. I can feel it. I feel it every time I look at him.”

It continues like that for almost five minutes, while Stiles stands stalk still and petrified in the hallway, heart beating wildly and sweat dripping down his forehead. He can’t even fathom what would happen if he was caught now, but he can’t leave yet. He wants to hear what happens at the end. He wants to see what’s happening, but he doesn’t dare get any closer to the stairs. There’s a strong scent coming from the basement; incense of some sort, he guesses, but his nose isn’t sensitive enough to identify it.

“I’m going to count backwards from five,” the woman finally says. “When I reach one, you will wake up. You won’t remember any of this. Seth will take you home. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Cora says, and Stiles beats feet. He skitters across the house as silently as he can manage and ducks out the back door.

He’s sure as hell not about to ride back with Seth and Cora; God knows if they would go straight to the Hale house or what Seth would do if he discovered him. It’s a warm spring night. He’ll be fine. He pulls up the GPS on the phone and saves his current location. He can come back later, try to find out who owns the house. He zooms out until he sees civilization, and then begins to jog down the narrow forest lane.

It takes about half an hour to come out onto a main road and see a Circle K. He checks his phone and sees that service is back, and calls Derek. “Hey,” he says, heart still pounding. “I’m fine, but we went out of town a ways. Can you come pick me up?”

“Sure,” Derek says, and Stiles texts him the address.

“Bring Peter,” he says.

He can hear the tension in Stiles’ voice. “Did you find something?”

“I found all the things,” Stiles says. “I’m uploading some stuff to the cloud. So if I don’t – ”

“Don’t even go there,” Derek snarls. But then he says, “I can’t bring Peter. Not if you’re not in Beacon Hills anymore. He’s not allowed to leave, remember?”

“Fucking Christ,” Stiles says. “Well, come get me and then bring me to wherever Peter is.”

“Okay. I’ll pick you up in half an hour.”

He hangs up before Stiles can reply. Stiles takes a breath, goes into the Circle K, and buys himself a soda. Then he waits.

It feels like a small eternity, but in reality it’s just over twenty minutes, which means Derek drove much faster than could be considered reasonable. He arrives not in his Camaro, which doesn’t
comfortably seat three, but in Laura’s station wagon. Before he can get in, Derek gets out, and Stiles allows the werewolf to pull him into a tight embrace, rub his cheek all over Stiles’ hair, surreptitiously check him for any injuries. “I’m okay, Der,” he says, and Derek growls softly but then nods.

“C’mon,” he says, getting back into the car. “Peter’s waiting for us at the edge of town. He didn’t want to wait.”

“Probably all for the best,” Stiles says, getting his seat belt on. Derek heads back down the road and, true to his word, pulls over just past the ‘Welcome to Beacon Hills’ sign. Peter is indeed waiting right at the edge of town, not at the nearest Starbucks or convenience store.

“Well, then,” Peter says, getting into the backseat of the station wagon, “what have you discovered?”

“They went straight out to this crazy expensive looking house out of town,” Stiles says. “And, well, the recording speaks for itself.” He takes out his phone and starts the playback.

Peter goes stiff immediately. “That’s Gaelic,” he says. “A lot of sorcerers or witches use Gaelic for their spells.”

When the English portion starts, Derek snarls immediately. It looks like he might drive right off the road in his rage.

“It does, indeed, speak for itself,” Peter says, and Stiles sees that his eyes are gleaming blue in the darkness. “Tell me everything. Start at the beginning. And then we’ll hear it again.”

Stiles nods and starts with the bugs in Seth’s apartment, the loud music in the car, the idea. He describes the house in detail and even the woman’s voice. It seems strangely familiar to him, especially in English, but he can’t place it. If it’s a member of the WLO, there are a dozen court cases or television interviews that he might have heard it on.

Derek doesn’t want to hear the recording again, but Peter makes Stiles play it anyway.

“This dialogue,” he finally says, “was written by a werewolf.”

Stiles stiffens in his seat. “How can you tell?”

“The things she says. The way she wants Cora to feel. It’s a description of having a mate that could only come from someone who has experienced it. Simple things like ‘I would die without him’, anyone could come up with that. But ‘I can’t sleep without knowing he’s there’. ‘When he looks at me, I can’t notice anything else.’ Those are very specific, and very accurate.”

“Jesus,” Stiles says, pushing both hands through his hair.

“For now, it doesn’t matter,” Peter says. “We’ve discovered the mechanism. A combination of magic and hypnosis, probably layered on top with drugs. And now we know that we should be able to break Seth away from Cora. If they’re bringing her back out here to do this frequently, it’s because it needs continuous reinforcement. Remove it, and she’ll realize on her own that it was a lie.”

Derek breathes a deep sigh of relief. “Okay. What . . . what now?”

“Drop me off at home, if you please,” Peter says. “Nothing’s to be done tonight. I need time to prepare some things, and in any case Seth rarely comes into the house when he drops Cora off in
the evenings. I don’t want him realizing we’re onto him. I’ll speak to Talia and we’ll close in tomorrow. Stiles, you’re certain you weren’t noticed?”

“Well, I can’t be certain, but I’m pretty damned sure,” Stiles says.

Peter nods. “Good. Then we’ll wait. Derek, I think you’d better go back to Stiles’ place for tonight. I know that it will be difficult for you, not to say anything to Cora when she gets home.”

Derek sighs, nods, and drives back to the house. They all get out of the car, so they can leave Laura’s car at the den and take Derek’s Camaro back to the Stilinski house. Peter takes a few steps towards the house, but then stops and turns around. “Stiles,” he says, and Stiles jerks to attention. “Well done. I’d say that this is more than I expected . . . but really, it wasn’t. I knew you were up to the task.”

With that said, he turns and heads into the house. Stiles stands there with his jaw agape for several long moments before Derek puts a hand on his arm and he heads for the Camaro.

“What do you want to do tonight?” Derek asks, as he gets in.


Derek takes his hands as Stiles starts to tug on his hair. “Okay, stop,” he says. “You’re tired. Don’t push yourself.”

“It’s just so fucking frustrating,” Stiles growls.

Derek leans over and kisses him on the forehead. “You,” he says, “are amazing. What you’ve done here is incredible. But you’re tired, you’re stressed, it’s been a hell of a long week. So stop . . . stop getting angry at yourself. It’s okay if you can’t remember some words right now. Let me take care of you tonight, okay?”

Stiles looks up at him as if searching for sincerity, and then nods and droops against Derek. “I don’t even want to . . . to knock boots. I just want to relax. Eat something that I didn’t cook.”

“Okay,” Derek says, rubbing a hand over Stiles’ back. “Let’s go back to your place, order some food, and watch a movie.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. And I want a . . . a shower that you take lying down.”

“A bath?” Derek supplies, and Stiles nods. “Okay.”

That’s exactly what they do. They go back to the Stilinski house. Derek orders them some takeout, draws Stiles a bath, makes him get in. He rubs his feet and kisses him over and over again while he tells him how awesome and clever and beautiful he is. By the time the food arrives and Stiles is out the bath, the teenager is basically a puddle of jelly. He eats half a plate of Chinese food and falls asleep in Derek’s arms.

~ ~ ~
Stiles: like a boss.

Credit must go to the lovely MsCee for the line about Stiles having Left-Handed activities cut short because he's got a roast in the oven. =D

Stiles sleeps in the next morning. He doesn’t mean to. In fact, he sets the alarm on his phone to wake him at eight AM. That’s generous, given that he normally gets up at six. And it’ll give him time to do some of his homework before heading over to the Hale house.

But he sleeps through the alarm, so soundly that he doesn’t even remember it going off. He doesn’t even wake when Derek gets out of bed, and rolls over at about ten thirty wondering where in the hell he is and how he slept so long. He yawns for about an hour and then shambles downstairs in search of breakfast.

Derek has clearly been up for a while, because there’s fresh coffee and a box of pastries sitting on the counter. He glances up and smiles as Stiles walks into the kitchen. “I was going to bring you breakfast in bed, but I didn’t want to wake you before you’d gotten enough sleep.”

“Mmmphg,” Stiles says, because his mouth is already full of a Danish. Derek just gives a snort of laughter. Halfway through the pastry, Stiles finally stops eating long enough to ask, “Have I missed anything?”

“No. Cora came home last night pretty much like usual. Seth said he’s going to be by sometime in the midafternoon today, so we should get home at some point, but we don’t have to rush.”

“Good,” Stiles says, rediscovering his libido after the single night of being too exhausted to care, “because I don’t want to rush.”

They don’t. It’s past noon before they leave the house, and Derek takes Stiles to the grocery store since he hasn’t had a chance to do the weekend shopping yet. He had finished the list the previous afternoon, and he keeps it on his phone, so he doesn’t need to go back to the Hale house to check on anything. Grocery shopping for a pack of werewolves is quite the process, so they don’t get back to the den until around two.

Cora is there, seeming a little glazed and despondent. Derek prods her to help carry in the groceries because he thinks some movement will be good for her. Stiles can remember the day she would have been first off the sofa, peering into the bags and exclaiming over things that he had bought that she likes and speculating on what he’s going to make. It’s hard to watch her like this, but the grief and fear over her condition has condensed into a little ball of rage.

The tension in the air is so thick that it seems impossible that she hasn’t noticed, but she seems oblivious. Talia has obviously gone to some lengths to keep the less involved parties away. Melissa, Scott, and Allison aren’t there, even though it’s quite common for them to be at the den on
Saturdays. Tom is working; Jonathan is visiting his parents. So it’s quiet, as quiet as it ever can be.

Stiles sets up shop in the kitchen, getting the food organized and starting on all the prep work he’ll need done for the coming week. Derek sits at the kitchen table, chatting with him and playing Scrabble with Cora. Stiles is telling him about how the best way to cook a roast is at a high temperature for a short time, like twenty minutes, and then turn the temperature way down for a few hours. That’s why he’s getting dinner started, he says, even though it’s only three PM.

He doesn’t hear Seth’s car when it approaches, but Derek clearly does, because his shoulders hunch inward a little and he determinedly doesn’t look towards the front of the house. Cora does, but it’s slow and lazy, nothing like her excitement in the first few weeks of Seth’s presence in her life. When nothing happens, the tension eases out of Derek’s shoulders. Another minute passes before Cora frowns faintly and says, “I . . . thought I heard Seth’s car.”

“Did you?” Derek asks, and shrugs. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Oh . . .”

Stiles isn’t fond of messing with her head more than it’s already messed, but there’s no way he wants Cora privy to what’s going on. Peter had been adamant that they would take Seth on their own ground. Fewer variables that way.

Peter saunters into the house a few minutes later and has a quiet word in Talia’s ear. Talia nods and then says, “You know, it’s so nice out today – how about a trip out to the park?”

“The kids could use some time to run around,” Laura immediately responds, sounding a little rehearsed. “Cora, you’ll come along and help me wrangle them since Jon’s working, right?”

“Oh,” Cora says. “Sure. I guess. Seth was going to come over . . .”

“Don’t worry,” Stiles says cheerfully. “I have to stay here with the roast, so when he shows up, I’ll tell him where you’re at.”

“Okay,” Cora says, getting to her feet.

Derek looks between Stiles and Peter before saying, “I’ll stay here and keep Stiles company.”

“All right,” Talia says, and she takes Cora’s arm through hers without giving her room to protest, pulling her outside. Stiles hopes that Peter hid Seth’s car, but this is Peter he’s talking about, so he’s sure it’s all taken care of.

Peter just stands in the kitchen for a long minute with an absent expression on his face. Stiles assumes he’s waiting for the noise of the pack’s departure, something that Stiles himself can’t hear. After a few minutes, the blank distance in his face changes into a predatory smile. “Well, then,” he says. “Shall we?”

“Where is he?” Stiles asks.

“The shed. Quite well secured. I figured you would want to observe. This is, after all, your show. But I’ll handle the details.”

Derek stands up. “I’m going to – ”

“You’re going to stay here,” Peter tells him, picking up a bowl and filling it with water from the sink. When it looks like Derek might argue, he says, “This is not a negotiation, Derek. We may
need you to play good cop later, and that won’t work if you hang around and watch bad cop at
work. Besides, the oven is still on. We wouldn’t want the house to burn down.”

Derek grimaces, then looks askance at Stiles. Stiles nods and leans up to kiss him on the cheek.
“T’ll be fine,” he says, and follows Peter. They head across the backyard and into the shed where
the tools for the yard work are kept. It’s about eight feet square, and Peter has cleared a lot of it
out. Seth is tied to a chair in the middle of the room, unconscious.

Stiles coughs a little, smelling burned hair. He looks from Seth to Peter and says, incredulously,
“Did you tase him?”

“Yes, of course,” Peter says, unperturbed. “I didn’t want him making a fuss.”

“I figured you would just knock him upside the head.”

Peter shakes his head. “Even as a beta, moderating my strength can be difficult. It would have been
too easy to kill him or cause permanent brain damage.”

“Yeah, well, maybe then he’d know what it was like,” Stiles mutters.

Peter gives an amused snort of laughter, then says, “Would you like to wake him?”

“Fuck yeah,” Stiles says, accepting the bowl of water from Peter and dashing it in Seth’s face. Seth
comes awake with a shout, sputtering and shaking his head, trying to regain his bearings. “Rise and
shine!” Stiles says. “Guess who’s coming to dinner? Not you, asshole!”

“Jesus,” Seth says groggily, shaking his head again. “What the fuck . . .”

“Pay attention,” Stiles snaps, and Seth manages to focus on him. “The jig, as they say, is up. We
know what you’ve been doing to Cora. Now is your one and only chance to come clean with us, tell
us everything, and save your own ass.”

“I haven’t been doing – ”

Stiles hits ‘play’ on his phone, and Cora and the witch’s voice start playing loud and clear. Seth
goes absolutely white. His gaze darts between Stiles and Peter like he’s not sure which one of them
is more dangerous. “Now that we’ve gotten that cleared up,” Stiles says, “let’s move on. Where
should we start? How about the basics? What’s your name? Because it sure as fuck all isn’t Seth
‘the Freud’ Freudenberg.”

Seth bites his lip and looks away. “It is Seth,” he says. “I didn’t take on a fake first name because I
didn’t think I’d react to someone saying a fake name right.”

“Okay, well, that makes things simple,” Stiles says. “Let’s get down to brass tacks. Who hired
you? And what, exactly, did they hire you for?”

“No, nobody hired me – ”

“Dude,” Stiles says, “try to keep up. I’ve been in your bank account, Seth. I know that you’re
getting paid. You sure as hell didn’t buy that ginormous entertainment center in your living room
with pocket change leftover after tuition.”

Seth sputters. “How do you – ”

“Been in your bank account, been in your apartment, been in your car, can you try to focus, Seth?”
“Well, gee, looks like you already know everything,” Seth says, “so I guess there’s nothing I need to tell you.”

“Are you fucking serious?” Stiles asks. “Do you have any idea what you’ve gotten yourself into? How far in over your head you are right now? Do you think Peter will hesitate to torture the information out of you? Or that I’ll stop him? I’m going to take video and then play it at Cora’s wedding, whenever that rolls around. You’ve done a really, really good job at making us hate you. A damned sight too good for your own comfort level.”

Seth’s jaw tightens. “Yeah, well, let’s just say that I’ve got some pretty compelling reasons to keep my mouth shut.”

“Such as?” Stiles asks incredulously. “Are you going to say that whoever put you up to this can do worse? Have you met Peter?”

Peter puts a hand on Stiles’ arm and says, “This isn’t getting us anywhere.” Without warning, almost too fast to be seen, his arm whips out and he slams his own fist down onto Seth’s where it lies on the arm of his chair. The teenager howls with pain. Peter turns to Stiles and says, “Always start with the hands. They’re very sensitive, but not at all crucial to life, and as a bonus, they’ll need their hands for any escape attempts, so disabling them is a good idea.”

“Should I be taking notes?” Stiles asks. “My memory, you know, it still isn’t so great.”

“Don’t worry, I’m filming this,” Peter says, gesturing to a camera in the corner that Stiles hadn’t noticed. “You can review later. I want a complete record of everything he tells us that we can refer to later.”

“Gotcha,” Stiles says, and turns back to Seth. “So what’s it gonna be? You’ve got a lot of bones we could break. I can’t imagine that’s a tempting prospect.”

Seth says, through gritted teeth, “If they find out I told you anything, they’ll kill me.”

“Dude,” Stiles says, “what do you think we’re going to do to you if you don’t? As far as I can see, you’ve got two choices here. You can tell us everything you know, whereupon we’ll put you in some sort of werewolf witness protection program. Or you can refuse, whereupon you’ll be tortured for hours, die horribly, and then buried in a shallow grave. And if you’re really lucky, it’ll be in that order. Now can we speed this up? I’ve got a roast in the oven and if it gets overdone because you’re being a prick, I’ll have Peter pull out your fingernails.”

Seth stares at him for a minute and then looks away. “You don’t fuck around,” he says, with a note of grudging respect in his voice. “Okay, but there’s only so much I can tell you. There’s stuff I just don’t know, and you’d better leave my fucking fingernails alone about shit I don’t know.”

“Start talking,” Stiles says, “and we’ll see.”

“Okay,” Seth says, and huffs out a breath. “Yeah, okay. My name’s Seth Youngstown. I’m an actor.”

“An actor,” Peter murmurs. “Not precisely what I expected, but it does make sense.”

“I’m from LA, okay? And about six months ago, I’m dirt broke and living in a one-room shack, still waiting for my ‘big break’. Then I see this ad on one of the head-hunting sites I use. It calls for males ages eighteen through twenty-four, for the ‘role of a lifetime’. Said it would pay well and have a six-month run. So I sent in my portfolio and then kind of forgot all about it, because ‘role of a lifetime’ could be anything and probably isn’t shit.
“Then in December I got a request for an audition tape. They said it was all being done online. But they didn’t just want anything. They gave a list of roles to choose from and said to act out a scene from one of them. I noticed they were all villains and was like, ‘okay, so they’re looking for someone to play a villain’. It’s not really my shtick but I hadn’t had a gig in over six months so I shot some video, did that scene from ‘The Two Towers’ where Wormtongue was creepin’ on Eowyn. They must’ve liked it because I got a call a week later, saying I was a finalist and they wanted to talk to me about the project in detail, but I’d have to sign an NDA.”

“What’s that?” Stiles asks.

“A nondisclosure agreement,” Peter says. “Not something typically required for actors.”

“Yeah,” Seth says, “so I knew something was up. And I almost backed out, but they’d also sent along the preliminary contract and they were offering ten thousand per week, and fuck, who turns that down? So I met at their office.”

“Who did you meet?”

“This guy, okay, he said his name was Jack Babylon, so that’s gotta be a pseudonym. But I didn’t worry about it, everyone uses fucking fake names in Hollywood. He had me sign the NDA and then he said that they were a scientific organization that was trying to figure out, in the wake of everything that had happened, if the searching Ceremonies were secure. I asked what the fuck that meant, and they said they were trying to find out if a werewolf could be forced to pick someone for a mate. And that in order to do that, they needed someone to portray that mate.”

Stiles and Peter exchange a glance, and Stiles gestures for him to keep going.

“I said that sounded impossible, and they said they knew that, but they had developed a method that they thought would work, and if it worked, it would spell trouble for everyone. They made it sound like – you know, like some hackers work as white hats, to find flaws in security to fix them before they can be exploited. That’s how they made it sound. They said if it didn’t work and I didn’t get chosen, then no harm, no foul. They’d pay me for a week of work and cut me loose. But if it did work, then I’d get paid ten grand for every week that I managed to stay in the pack.”

“Then why the hell did you try to piss us all off so much?” Stiles asks. “Don’t tell me that’s your natural behavior.”

“No, but that’s what they told me to do. They wanted to know how far the pack could be pushed before they’d snap. They said ‘keep Cora happy, but piss off everyone else’. They wanted me to get inside, find your weaknesses, figure out where the soft spots were.”

“Well,” Peter murmurs, “you did an admirable job at that. Tell me what happened the day of the Ceremonies.”

“So in the first week of January, they told me who my ‘mate’ was going to be,” Seth says. “They said they had picked the Hale pack because they knew Talia Hale would be reluctant to reject a chosen mate out of hand, and that would give me an in. I did a little bit of research on all of you. All I did the day of the Ceremonies was walk in and offer Cora a drink that I’d been given.”

“Drugged?”

“Yeah,” Seth says. “They said it was a compound tailored for werewolves to put them in a suggestive frame of mind. All I had to do was ask her to go with me, and she did. Then I brought her to the house. Where you were the other night.”
“The witch,” Peter says. “Who is she?”

“I don’t know,” Seth says. “I never saw her. I brought Cora to the house and told her to go downstairs. But I wasn’t allowed downstairs. I went upstairs to wait. I never saw her and nobody ever told me her name.”

“How did you get paid, then?” Stiles asks.

“Direct deposit into my bank account,” Seth says. “Yeah, I met with Jack once a week to give him my report and get a new supply of the drugs. After the first month, they told me that they wanted to extend the contract to a year. I told them I’d never make it that long. That I was pretty much surprised I still had my face intact. But they insisted. They said they were so impressed with my work, they thought I could pull it off.”

“They wanted a year,” Peter says, and looks at Stiles.

Stiles feels sick. “They wanted to announce the results right before the Ceremonies next year. Jesus, what a blood bath that would be.”

Peter nods and looks at Seth. “You didn’t actually believe that ‘white hat’ bullshit, did you?”

“At first I did, but . . . not for long.” Seth shrugs. “But what could I do? A job’s a job. They were writing the checks.”

“You know, pretty much any werewolf pack would have doubled their offer if you had brought it directly to them,” Peter says. “God knows we would have.”

“Ten grand a week?” Seth asks skeptically. “For six months, that’s two hundred and forty thousand bucks.”

“Yes, which means that if we had known about the possibility of a year contract, we basically would have shelled out a cool mil just to know about it.” Peter says. “Keep that in mind next time you think about the paltry hundred grand you actually earned. Now. We’re going to start back at the beginning.”

Peter wants to know everything. Stiles does wind up taking notes, just because he’s so impressed by how thorough Peter’s interrogation is. He wants to know where the ad was posted, what Seth’s response was, where the e-mails came from. He wants to know what Jack Babylon looked like, sounded like, where his offices were located, what Seth thought of him in contrast to other agents he had met. He wants to hear about every single one of their meetings, where and when they were, what was said, what Jack wore, what kind of car he drove. He wants to know who came up with the plan to frame Peter for Gerard’s murder, when that happened, how it came up. He wants every scrap of detail that can be wheedled out of Seth’s brain. Stiles texts Derek with updates occasionally, so he’ll know that things are going well. He thinks Peter is periodically texting Talia; he’s spending a lot of time on his phone.

By the end of it, they’re swimming in new information, new angles, new leads. Stiles is exhausted just from watching.

Peter sits with his eyes closed for a long time, almost two full minutes. Stiles gets Seth some water, because he’s been talking for a long time, and he can respect Seth-the-broke-but-intelligent-actor a lot more than he can respect Seth-the-dudebro.

“Well,” Peter finally says, “I think that’s everything. Do you have any questions, Stiles?”
“No, I’m tapped out,” Stiles says.

“Then go in and see to your mate and our dinner,” Peter says. “I’ll take care of him.”

Stiles turns, then hesitates. “By ‘take care of’ you mean you’re going to wrap his hand or something, right? Because ‘take care of’ sounds pretty fucking ominous to me.”

Peter stands up smoothly. “He threatened the pack. He hurt my niece. We’ve gotten all we can from him.”

“Dude, what?” Seth blurts out.

“You can’t kill him,” Stiles says, simultaneously.

“Yes, I can, and yes, I will,” Peter says. “What’s the alternative, Stiles? We set him free? Let him run back to his masters and cry about what we did to him, so they know exactly what we know? Take the money he got from drugging and tormenting Cora to go live in the Bahamas? Let him take this story about how werewolves can be manipulated to the press and have a hundred other organizations with witches on payroll trying to duplicate it?”

Stiles’ jaw sets. “No,” he says, “but you’re not going to kill him, either. Not after you told him that we wouldn’t hurt him if he cooperated. That’s fucked up. Am I happy about what he did? Fuck, no. But it doesn’t deserve the death sentence.”

“If you’re going to be the Left Hand – ”

“Then I’ll make my own left-handed rules,” Stiles interrupts. “You said this was my show. You gave this to me to solve and I did it. Which means we’ll do this my way, and we’re not killing him.”

Peter stares at him for a long minute before he nods acquiescence and says, “Then what do you have in mind?”

“He’s being arrested,” Stiles says. “We can put him in jail where we can monitor his correspondence, his contacts, and his location.”

“We don’t have anything on him,” Peter says. “Not that he would actually receive jail time for. Identity theft, fraud, maybe, but . . .”

“We have him on statutory rape,” Stiles says.

Peter frowns. “He never had sex with Cora.”

“We know that. Cora knows that. But she’ll say whatever we tell her to say, if it’s for the good of the pack, and Seth will say whatever we tell him to say, if it means you won’t rip his throat out and bury him in the forest.” Stiles looks Seth in the eye. “Right?”

Seth swallows hard and nods. “Y-Yeah.”

“And you won’t do anything stupid like post bail and try to run because you know that we’d find you, right?”

“Yeah,” Seth says.

Peter sighs. “I suppose this is all for the best. If it turns out he’s lied about any of this, we would need to question him again anyway. Very well. Go call your father. I’ll speak with Talia so she can
prep Cora – although honestly, I’m not sure I like the idea of putting her through this. I don’t suppose your father would agree to forge her statement?”

“Take that up with him,” Stiles says, picturing his father’s face if he even asks. He turns and heads back into the house.

Derek is pacing around in the backyard. He looks up and his face brightens as Stiles approaches, holding a hand out to the teenager. Stiles takes it, twines his fingers through Derek’s, and lets himself be led inside. Then he leans against the kitchen counter for a long minute.

“You okay?” Derek asks.

“I cooked this damned roast and nobody’s going to want to eat it,” Stiles says with a sigh, “but yeah, I’m okay. I have to call my dad. Hang on.” He takes out his phone and dials. His father picks up on the fourth ring, so it seems like he might be busy. “Hey, do you have a sec?”

“What’s up?” the sheriff asks.

“Can you come to the Hale house? We’ve . . . gotten some information out of Seth and now we need to do something with him. So he’s getting arrested. For statutory.”

“I thought Seth and Cora hadn’t . . .”

There’s a telling moment of silence.

“Okay,” Tom says, “I’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

“Thanks.” Stiles hangs up and leans against Derek, pressing his face into the other man’s chest while Derek rubs his hands up and down Stiles’ back. He gives Derek a brief summary of what they found out, and how he’s obviously going to be busy for the next month or eight looking into everything. “Or maybe Peter will be doing it, I don’t know, I don’t know what my place is in this anymore.”

Derek shakes his head a little and says, “Even if Peter’s taking care of it, I know you. You’ll stick your nose into it whether it’s your job or not.”

Stiles laughs and says, “I guess you’re right about that.” He sobers immediately. “Peter was texting with your mother off and on. I guess she’s probably broken the news to Cora by now.” He heaves a sigh and leans against Derek more heavily. “I know she’s probably miserable about it. And for some reason I feel guilty. Isn’t that stupid?”

“Yeah, a little.” Derek presses a kiss into Stiles’ forehead. “This wasn’t your fault, Stiles.”

“I know. I just wish I knew whose fault it was.”

“Well,” Derek says, “we’ll just have to find out.”

~ ~ ~
Talia looks up from her phone and waves Aaron over. He sits down in the grass next to her, leans over, and reads Peter’s latest text. It reads, ‘He’s cooperating. You can break the news to Cora.’ Aaron lets out a long breath. “Do you want to do that now? Or do you think it would be better to wait a few days? Let the conditioning wear off?”

Talia shakes her head wearily and pushes a hand through her hair. “We can’t explain his absence any other way. If he just disappears, stops answering her phone calls, she’ll just get upset for different reasons. And then most likely upset at us for hiding the truth, and I couldn’t blame her. It’s better if we do this now. Rip off the Band-Aid, so to speak.”

Aaron nods and says, “I’m going to have Laura take the kids out of earshot.”

“Okay.” Talia gets to her feet and walks over to where Cora is sitting on one of the swings, not really pushing herself back and forth, but just sitting there. “Honey, come talk to me for a minute,” she says, and Cora blinks at her lethargically. Talia extends her hands and gets Cora off the swing so they’re both sitting down in the grass. She watches as Laura scoops up Sylvia and herds Tyler off to the edge of the park to examine a fountain there. Aaron comes back over a few moments later so he can sit with them.

“It’s about Seth,” Talia says.

Cora’s gaze drops. “You’re finally getting rid of him, aren’t you.”

Talia lets out a breath. There’s no easy way to say it, and no purpose to lying. “Yes, honey. He’s not your mate.”

Cora’s eyes fill with tears. “He is,” she says. “I know he, he’s awful, but he is.”

“No.” Talia takes her daughter’s chin in one hand, is careful to keep her tone moderated and gentle, even though she’s itching to go break every bone in Seth’s body. “He’s not. And I know you don’t believe me, and that’s okay. You’ve been drugged, and brainwashed, and God, I – I wish I had been able to put a stop to this sooner. But until we had figured out what exactly he was doing, we didn’t know how to help you, didn’t know if simply making him leave would help.”

“You can’t take him away from me,” Cora begs. “Please, Mom, you can’t. I’ll – I’ll go with him if I have to.”

Talia’s eyes flare red despite her best efforts. “You are not going anywhere,” she says. “You’re my beta. You belong to this pack.” She feels Aaron’s hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze, and tries to calm down. “Seth isn’t your mate, and you’re going to feel better about this in a few days, once what he’s done to you has had some time to wear off.”

“I don’t, I don’t understand,” Cora says. “He wasn’t doing anything to me.”

“He was, Cora,” Aaron says gently. “You just don’t remember it. That was part of the brainwashing. There was magic involved.”

“Cora,” Talia says. “You have to trust us. Can you trust us?”
“I do,” Cora says, and starts crying. “I trust you, Mommy. But it doesn’t make any sense. It doesn’t feel real.”

“I know, honey, I know,” Talia says, pulling her into an embrace. “I’m so sorry that this happened. I promise that we’re going to make everything okay. For now you can be as, as angry and upset as you want. He’s not going to hurt you again. I promise.”

Cora’s crying too hard to talk, so for several long minutes, Talia just rocks her back and forth. Finally, she sniffs and starts to settle down. “He . . . he was so awful and . . . sometimes I hated him but . . . but I thought I would die if he left me.”

“You’re not going to die, Cora,” Talia says. “You’re going to be fine. I won’t lie, this might not be easy. You’re going to feel pretty awful over the next few days. You’re going to feel really alone and scared and hurt. But we’ll get you through it. Once the magic wears off, you’ll start to feel better. Remember last week? Didn’t you feel better on Thursday and Friday?”

“Yeah, I . . . I guess so.” Cora sniffs again. “I had fun at Stiles’ party.”

“That was because we managed to keep him from giving you any drugs or doing the magic for a few days,” Talia says. “So just hang in there, okay? Pretend you’re sick. Just a virus. It’ll pass.”

“I’ve never been sick,” Cora says.

“Your mother isn’t the best at metaphors,” Aaron says, and is rewarded with a wan smile. He rubs his hand over Cora’s hair. “Just know that we’re here. Whatever you need. Even if you’re angry at us. That’s okay. But we’re your pack, and you’re not going to be alone. Not ever.”

Cora wipes a hand over her eyes. “How . . . how did you find out?”

Talia’s gaze flickers to Aaron and then she says, “Well, that’s what Peter does.”

“It was Stiles, wasn’t it,” Cora says miserably. “He knew right from the start. He wouldn’t let it go. Seth was so awful to him.”

Talia isn’t sure what to say, because she doesn’t want Cora to be mad at Stiles. None of this is his fault. But she doesn’t want to lie, either. She goes for a middle path. “I think he helped Peter put some of it together.”

Cora nods and nestles closer to her mother. “Will you . . . tell them I said thank you? I don’t think I’ll be able to say it to them myself.”

“Sure,” Talia says, hugging her tighter.

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Stiles hides in the kitchen while his father deals with Peter. Frankly, he doesn’t want to hear how that’s going to go. He just hopes that Seth is still breathing when his father gets there, since he doesn’t really trust Peter not to kill the teenager as soon as his back is turned. Tom disappears into the shed for quite a long time before he comes into the kitchen to talk to Stiles. Stiles half-expects his father to start asking him questions or listing problems, but all he does is say, “You did good, kid,” and gives him a hug. Stiles suspects that he’s being praised more for his lack of homicidal
intent than his sleuthing, but he’ll take what he can get. While he’s working on dinner, Derek is going around the front hallway, living room, anywhere that Seth has been recently, and spraying it down with a strong-smelling cleaner. He doesn’t want Cora to come home and smell her ex-mate all over the house.

“Is it going to be okay to leave him in prison?” Derek asks when he’s done, watching Tom lead Seth out to the cruiser in handcuffs. “What if the people who hire him come after him to shut him up?”

“Well, then it’ll be his own fault for getting involved in something so shady, and you can’t fucking blame me,” Stiles says, and Derek gives a snort of laughter despite himself. “But I doubt they will. They know we won’t let him out of our sight until he’s spilled the beans, so they’ll know the damage is done. They could still kill him, but it’d be a risk, and I think they’re too smart to take it.”

Derek’s jaw tightens. “Is it bad that I almost wish they would kill him, if that got them to make a mistake we could use to find them?”

“I have to admit to similar thoughts,” Stiles says, and sighs. He’s about to say something else, but then the oven timer goes off. He leans down to get the roast out of the oven, checks it with the meat thermometer, and proclaims it satisfactory. “When I say ‘Jack Babylon’, what pops into your head?”

“Uh . . . nothing,” Derek says. “Why?”

“It’s the name of Seth’s contact. Obviously fake.” Stiles shrugs. “When people choose fake names, a lot of the time they include something personal that might give them away. And if it were something like Jack I-Hate-Werewolves, that might be helpful. But I can’t see what the fuck Babylon would have to do with what’s going on.”

“There’s a lot of Biblical imagery,” Derek says, rubbing a hand over his hair. “Stuff in Revelations. Maybe they’re trying to say it’s going to be the end of the world.”

“Maybe,” Stiles says thoughtfully. “That would make sense. I mean, just think about it – think about what would have happened if they had announced right before the Ceremonies next year that they had used the ceremonies to successfully infiltrate a werewolf pack. Jesus, it would be chaos.”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees, grimacing. “But what would be worse would be if they didn’t announce it. Because they actually could use it to infiltrate a werewolf pack. We all knew something was wrong with Seth because he was such an asshole right from the beginning. But imagine if he wasn’t. Imagine if they researched Cora, her personality, her interests, and had someone actually try to fit the role? We would never have suspected anything. They would’ve had a sleeper agent right inside our pack and we would never have been the wiser.”

“Jesus,” Stiles says. “And there’s nothing saying that the brainwashing would need to be reinforced so vigorously if that were the case, either. It could be permanent after a while, if the victim wasn’t perpetually trying to kick it off. You know, there’s nothing even saying that we were the only ones. We were a test case, sure, but we might not have been the only test case. They might have picked us to be the one where the plant antagonized us, to see how far we could be pushed, but what if there are others? Other packs around the country where someone was tricked into choosing the wrong person?”

“Oh, Christ,” Derek agrees. He shakes his head and says, “We’ll track it back to the source. We have to. At least now that we can get rid of Seth, we’re all in this together.”
“Yeah. I guess.”

Derek draws him into another hug. They stand there in silence for a minute before he looks up and says quietly, “I can hear Dad’s car. Which means I’ll be able to hear Laura’s in a minute.” The size of Aaron’s car is an ongoing family joke. “Do you want to stay in here?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, then adds in a rush, “D’you think she’s mad at me?”

Derek hesitates, then answers truthfully. “I think she might be, today. But I know that she won’t be in a few days.”


Derek nods, kisses him on the forehead, and then heads out into the front hallway. The door opens a few moments later. Aaron has an arm around Cora’s shoulders, and he leads her into the house. She looks absolutely miserable, pale and exhausted and heartbroken. But she doesn’t flinch away when Derek gives her a hug; if anything, she clings, pressing her face into his chest. He squeezes her tight and rubs her back.

Finally, she pulls away, wipes her eyes and says, “I’m just going to go . . . to my room. And . . . hide there. Okay?”

“Sure,” Talia says, and Cora trudges up the stairs without another word. Talia’s gaze follows her, and she lets out a sigh as she hears the door upstairs shut. Then she proceeds into the kitchen.

“How is she?” Stiles asks anxiously.

“I think she’s handling it about as well as could be hoped,” Aaron says. “She’s upset, hurt, angry. Relieved. Guilty about being relieved. It’s a lot to process.”

“Angry?” Stiles asks, fiddling.

“Not at you,” Talia says, and Stiles breathes a sigh of relief. “In fact, she asked me to thank you on her behalf, for looking out for her.”


For a moment it looks like someone might say they’re not really hungry and/or in the mood for a family meal. But then Talia manages a smile and says, “Let’s eat, then.”

The pack gathers around the table, minus Cora, of course, and Peter is still nowhere to be seen. Stiles thinks he’s cleaning up in the warehouse, or possibly reviewing the answers he got from Seth. He doesn’t expect to see him, but he comes in just as the dishes start being passed around. He takes his normal seat at Talia’s left, and Aaron hands him the iced tea.

“What are you thinking?” Talia asks him.

“That he knew disappointingly little, in the end,” Peter says. “Whoever used him was very smart about it. He knew virtually nothing about Gerard’s murder. Didn’t even know they were planning to kill him or what they wanted my fingerprints for. All of his contact was through intermediaries. I very much doubt we’ll be able to track down the elusive Jack Babylon, although of course I’ll do my best. If it weren’t for Cora’s welfare, I might have tried to have him fake the next meeting and followed him to it, but . . .” He gives his head a little shake. “Tom is going to have him sign an affidavit as to his involvement in my fingerprints turning up at Gerard’s house, so who knows?”
Perhaps I’ll stay a free man after all.”

“You’d better,” Laura says, nudging him with her elbow.

“There is, of course, concern that Seth was not the only person employed to this purpose,” Peter says, and Stiles glances up, since he and Derek had been saying the same thing. “It will be difficult to recommend a thorough vetting of all other mates chosen this year without setting off alarm bells. We’ll want to think about that.”

“Weren’t they basically asking to get caught, though?” Jonathan asks, cutting up pieces of the roast for Tyler. “I mean, by having Seth be so antagonistic?”

“I think they knew we would reject him,” Peter says, “but I don’t think that they knew we would discover his true purpose. Look at what happened – the moment Seth became concerned that I was too suspicious of his motives, they maneuvered to get me arrested and thrown in jail. No, they didn’t want to get found out.”

Aaron taps his fork against his plate. “And now they know we found them out.”

Peter nods.

“What’s going to stop them from releasing the information?” Aaron asks.

“Nobody wants to introduce an imperfect product onto the market,” Talia says. “My bet is that they’ll lay low and start all over next year.”

“Yes, that would be my assumption as well,” Peter says, “but we can’t overlook the possibility that we were targeted for more reasons than Seth knew. We have our share of enemies. We know a certain number of things about the larger force at work. For starters, they have a lot of money. Secondly, they are working with or at least have access to an alpha werewolf. Thirdly, they have someone who’s good with computers – they had altered those old news articles, et cetera. They also have a witch. What this points to is that we are not dealing with an individual, but an organization.” He calmly dishes himself up a second serving of potatoes. “Stiles, you have a friend who’s good with computers, do you not?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Stiles says. “My friend Danny. He helped me get some of the info from Seth’s bank account and stuff.”

“Good. We’re going to need his services again. We need to see if we can track down where this original ad was posted from, where the e-mails Seth received came from, et cetera. “ Peter takes a bite and then says, “We’ll pay him for his time, of course.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Stiles says. He’s suddenly exhausted, which is ridiculous, given how late he slept.

“I have some additional leads on the elusive ‘Jack Babylon’ I want to hit up,” Peter says, and then frowns. “Although until Tom has negotiated with the authorities in Santa Rosa, I still can’t leave Beacon Hills. I might need you to do some legwork for me.”

Talia clears her throat. “People who are not supposed to be in school can do legwork for you, Peter.”

Peter frowns at her, looking somewhat offended that she would dictate his use of resources. Then he glances at Stiles, who cringes. “Stiles?”
“I’m kinda . . . slipping in a couple of my classes,” Stiles admits.

“I can help you, Uncle Peter,” Laura interjects, to take the focus off Stiles and his embarrassment. “Jonathan’s parents can watch the kids a few afternoons if I need them to.”

“I can make the time, too,” Aaron says, nodding.

“Well, I suppose,” Peter says.

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The Sunday morning after Seth’s departure is somewhat subdued. Peter is nowhere to be seen. Stiles had trouble sleeping, and had wound up staying up half the night making notes about Seth’s confession. He only vaguely stirs when Derek leans over and gives him a good morning kiss. Since brunch obviously won’t be happening, Aaron goes out to get coffee and donuts. They’re half-eaten and it’s nearly eleven AM when Talia glances at the clock and sighs. “Derek, would you go check on your sister?”

Derek nods. After a few moments to think, he grabs a plate, puts two of Cora’s favorite kind of donut on it, and then grabs another for himself. He also gets her a mug of tea and then heads up the stairs and gently knocks on her door. There’s no reply. “Cora?” he calls out. He knows that she’s inside; he can hear her heartbeat. He doesn’t want to pull the ‘mom sent me to check on you’ card because that’s very close to the ‘your alpha demands a response’ card. “I brought donuts. They have little sprinkles.”

“Go away,” Cora says from somewhere inside. She doesn’t sound angry. Just miserable.

“Would you leave me alone if I sounded that unhappy?” Derek asks through the door.

There’s a moment of silence. “No. Asshole.”

“That’s what I thought. Now let me in so I can feed you sugar.”

The doors don’t lock – a sensible precaution in the home of a family that’s now survived two assassination attempts – but a moment later it opens and Cora stands back to let him in. She looks terrible. Her eyes are red-rimmed and tired, and the dark smudges underneath them indicate that she didn’t sleep well, if she slept at all. She’s wearing gym shorts and an oversized T-shirt, and her hair is in her face. She takes the mug of tea but ignores the donuts.

Derek closes the door behind himself and sets the plate down on her desk. After a few moments, he reaches out and gently moves her hair out of her face, but doesn’t say anything. He lets her keep her silence. She leans forward, pressing her cheek against his shoulder. He wraps his arm around her, careful of the mug full of tea but hugging her close all the same.

“Did they kill him?” she finally asks, her voice wavering.

“No. And no one is planning to.” Derek is glad he can give her that, because lie or not, she still feels connected to Seth.

“Mom said . . .” Cora pulls away, wiping impatiently at her eyes. “That I’d been brainwashed or something.”
“Something was done to you.” Derek doesn’t see the point in keeping the truth from her. “Something to make you, force you to think he was your mate.” He stays close to her, although she seems to be done being hugged for the moment. A human might want space, but closeness would help Cora more.

“I don’t – I don’t know what the fuck I’m supposed to feel about this,” Cora says, pushing her hands through her hair. “I mean, part of me’s happy? Because he was such a jerk? But part of me is sad because it feels like – like some part of me I can’t live without is just gone and I – ” Her voice hitches and she turns away, pressing one hand over her mouth.

Derek takes the tea and pulls her into another hug. “It’s okay for you to be upset,” he says, although he thinks this might be the understatement of the century.

“Why did he do this to me?” Cora chokes out, clinging to her brother.

“Because he’s . . .” Derek stops himself before he can say anything bad about the man that, at the moment, she still loves. “He’s working with bad people. They wanted to see if they could pull this off, force someone to pick a mate who isn’t right for them.” He tightens his hold for a few moments. “And we were good targets because of what happened with Mom and Stiles.”

“But . . . he’s not my mate?” Cora asks desperately. “You’re sure? You’re like, positive?”

“He’s not. We’re sure.” He says it again, just so she can hear it. “He’s not.”

“Okay.” Cora pulls away again and grabs a tissue from the box off her desk. “How long before – before it stops feeling like he is?”

“I don’t know exactly. But it will get better.” He rubs his cheek over her hair. “And you can ask any of us to tell you that as often as you want.” He knows that the more often she hears it, the more she’ll believe it, but he doesn’t know that telling her that will help.

Cora picks up a donut and starts to pick at the sprinkles. “Are the others – are people mad at me?” she asks in a small voice. “For bringing him home?”

“No.” Derek smoothes his hand down over her hair. “Why would we be mad at you? We’re angry for you, but not at you.”

“I just – I feel like I should have – should have known, or, or been smarter, or been able to – ”

“Go against the instinct that we’re taught to trust?” Derek says, shaking his head. He’s maybe judging her with his eyebrows. Just a little.

“When it told me that someone so awful was my mate, then yeah, maybe,” Cora says.

“You didn’t know. And besides, people don’t always get along. Look how long it took Stiles and Mom to manage being honestly civil to each other.”

“Yeah, well, they had issues,” Cora says. She starts tearing the donut into pieces. “I mean, Seth was so awful to everyone. Especially to Stiles. I’d be mad at me, if I were him.”

“Oh, he’s mad all right.” Stiles is kind of terrifying, actually. Peter’s showed him some select moments from the video. But now isn’t the time to think about how much that turns him on. “But not at you. He was the first one to really pick up on the fact that something had to be going on. That Seth was just wrong. Because he knows you. We all do. We know you wouldn’t pick someone like that if you had a choice.”
“You . . . you do?” Cora asks, looking up at her brother with painful uncertainty in her face.

Derke nods. “Why would you pick someone who made you so unhappy?”

“I . . . I guess that makes sense,” Cora says. “I mean. Stiles made you unhappy, but it wasn’t because of Stiles, it was just . . . other stuff was going on.” She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand and starts nibbling on the donut.

“Exactly. I would have put up with Seth forever if he had made you happy. And if he had actually been your mate, he would have wanted to make you happy.”

“I tried to tell myself . . . that he was trying, you know? That I had to give him time. But like . . . when I think back, there are times I know I was really mad at him and it just . . . everything seems so blurry now.”

“Because you were being drugged,” Derek reminds her. “It’ll get better.”

“Right.” Cora huffs out a breath. “Well, I can’t hide in here all day.”

“Nope. Come on out. We can watch Disney movies on the sofa all day if you want.”

“Okay. But I don’t . . . I don’t want everyone to try to talk to me about it, okay?”

“Okay,” Derek says.

“I’m just gonna go shower first.” Cora reaches up for another hug. “Thanks, Derek.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Hey all, chapters might be a wee bit slower for a while. It's the busy season at work (summer in pediatrics, what fun) and the chorus that I'm in has like three concerts coming up, so.... but I won't let you down, I promise!

Cora does indeed spend most of the day on the sofa. Everyone tries to pretend that things are normal. Derek makes popcorn and they end up having a Pixar marathon. Stiles has a lot of denmaking things to do, but he comes in for The Incredibles, and Talia even makes a special exception and lets them eat dinner in the living room while they watch Ratatouille. (Derek avoids both Up and Wall-E because he doesn’t want Cora anywhere near a love story right now.) Stiles has made tacos and everyone eats a ton.

After dinner, while the others are talking about their plans for the next day, Tom gets a hand on Stiles’ shoulder and says, “Got some things I need to discuss with you, son,” and tugs him out of the house.

Stiles is antsy as he settles in the cruiser. “What is it, did Seth – ”

“It’s not about Seth,” Tom says, turning the car around and starting down the narrow lane that leads to the Hale house. “Nothing has changed with Seth, and I will keep you posted if anything does. And it isn’t about Peter, either. The sheriff in Santa Rosa isn’t going to return my calls until tomorrow. This is about you.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, thinking about flinging himself out of the car and onto the road.

Tom clears his throat. “I seem to remember some promise you made me about letting me know if you were having trouble keeping up with your school work.”

Stiles cringes. “Uh, well, that was basically like you wanted to know if my brain started giving me trouble, and this really wasn’t about that, and I . . . I’m only digging a hole for myself, aren’t I.”

“A deep one,” Tom says. He huffs out a sigh. “Look, kid. I know that emotionally distancing yourself from this attack on your family, because that’s what it was, would’ve been impossible. I’m not angry at you. But I think there were some things you could’ve done differently, and yes, you broke a promise to me, however you want to interpret it.”

Stiles rubs a hand over the back of his head. “So . . . I’m grounded?”

“It’s hard to ground you when you barely live at home anymore,” his father replies, “so no, you’re not grounded. And I can’t really give you any chores without adding to your considerable workload, so that’s not really an appropriate punishment, either. So after some thought, I decided that your punishment is that I get to pick the menu for the next two weeks.”


“Yep,” Tom says. “Do you know what that means?”
“No?” Stiles responds nervously.


“Dad!” Stiles protests. “Your choles –”

“My cholesterol is fine,” Tom says. “You lied to me and made me worry about you, son. Which means I get two weeks of bacon cheeseburgers, curly fries, fried chicken –”


Tom thinks about it. “One week, and you make me some of those chocolate fudge muffins.”

Stiles groans like he’s dying. “Fine.”

Tom nods in satisfaction, and a smile tugs at the corner of his mouth for a few minutes. “But that’s not all. Your grades have improved in the last week or so, since you started letting other people help you. But I know that you’re going to keep helping Peter try to find whoever was behind this, and don’t tell me that you aren’t. School is important, Stiles. You do know that, right?”

“I . . . no, Dad, I don’t know that,” Stiles suddenly bursts out. “How am I supposed to care about analyzing Shakespeare or learning the taxonomic ranking system when someone is trying to hurt my pack? Why does school fucking matter, Dad?”

“Because the more you learn, the more knowledge you have, the more you’ll be able to help your pack. If not now, then in the future,” Tom says. “Because studies have showed that what you learn isn’t always what’s important; as long as you are learning, your brain continues to get faster and smarter, and that’s especially important for you, for your recovery. Is knowing about taxonomic ranking going to help your pack? No. But is learning about it going to make you that tiniest percentage smarter as a whole that could help someday? Yeah, maybe.”

Stiles blinks at him, then says, “God dammit, Dad, you weren’t supposed to have an answer for that.”

Tom gives him an unimpressed look. “Let me guess. You expected me to say something bland and boring about diplomas and GPAs and your future.”

“A little,” Stiles admits.

“And then you were going to come back about how you’ll probably never hold down a full-time job anyway and it’s all pointless.”

“Maybe,” Stiles grumbles.

“Good thing I saw that one coming, then,” Tom replies. “Must be all the school I went to.”

Stiles makes a face at him, then heaves a sigh. “Fine. Fine. I will put schoolwork at the highest priority. Unless I’m doing Left Hand stuff for Peter that is directly related to the ongoing conspiracy that is my life and is time sensitive. I’ll even let Aaron help me in the kitchen without complaining.”

“Good,” Tom says, “and you’re going to put away those cases from Duke.”

Stiles sputters. “But –”

“Stiles, those are cold cases. There’s nothing urgent about any of them. The most recent one he
ever gave you was eighteen months old. I’m not saying you have to give it up permanently. But you need to put it aside until the summer. And I know that if you still have them, even if you tell yourself you won’t work on them, you’ll still pull them out when you can’t focus on other things, get involved, and before you know it six hours will have gone by. This isn’t a punishment. Just a reprioritization.”

“I guess,” Stiles says, and sighs. “I mean, I just . . . doing them made me feel like I was okay, you know?”

“I do know,” Tom says, “and that’s why I haven’t said anything until now. You needed to prove to yourself that you could still solve mysteries. Well, bucko, I think you’ve good and proved it. So now you need to prove that you can keep your GPA where it needs to be so you can get into a good college and become a world-class detective like your old man.”

“Oh, okay,” Stiles says. “But . . . can I keep just one?”

Tom glances at him. “The nursery case?”

“If we’re gonna be honest, I’ve got it memorized, so even if you take it away I’ll probably still wind up working on it,” Stiles says. “I’ll give you the rest, honest, but that one . . .”

“Well, it’s probably nothing,” Stiles says, rubbing a hand over his face. “I mean, it’s the kind of thing you could only find once the case was cold, because it happened five years later. Just – you know Talia got me that subscription to the Lexis-Nexis, right? And I was looking up some of the people who had been involved. And one of the parents – one of the fathers – he disappeared five years after it happened. I mean, it might not even be related. But I just figured I might as well follow the trail to see if it leads anywhere.”

“Okay,” Tom says, “but believe me when I say that Dr. Kuan and I are keeping a very close eye on your grades.”


“Wanted to handle everything yourself,” Tom says, and shakes his head. “For someone so bright, you sure can be an idiot sometimes.”

Stiles smiles despite himself. “Yeah,” he says, “I know.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Wednesday evening, Stiles is doing his history homework at the kitchen table when Cora sits down across from him, bites her lower lip, and says abruptly, “Tell me everything.”

Stiles looks up at her, a little surprised, but then nods. “Everything everything?”
Cora nods. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. He starts at the beginning – with Seth. Who he was, how he was approached, what he was paid to do. He details his investigations into Seth’s apartment, his bank account, his ‘high school’. He describes the drugs and the hypnosis and the magic. Explains why Peter hadn’t wanted to torture Seth right at the beginning. “God, we would have if we could have,” he says. “We were so worried about you.”

Cora twines a strand of hair around her finger. “Why were you . . . so sure? You just talk about it like, right from the beginning, everyone knew.”

“Cora . . . of course we knew,” Stiles says. “You’re my sister. You’re . . . you’re the heart of this pack. Nobody believed you were meant to be with someone like that.”

She blinks up at him for a long moment, then starts to wipe her eyes. “Sorry, I just – ”

“It’s cool,” he says, grabbing her hands and giving them a squeeze. “Really.”

Cora takes a few minutes to compose herself, getting them both a glass of iced tea and grabbing the plate of cookies from the kitchen counter. “Here,” she says, putting them down.

“Thanks.” Stiles picks one up. “There was something else. Another reason why we knew. And . . . I’m gonna be honest here, I’m still not sure if I should tell you. But you said to tell you everything, and I don’t wanna lie, y’know? I’ve really had enough of lying and keeping secrets. Some parts of this Left Hand thing I’m good at, but some I just . . .”

“Oh, geez,” Cora says. “Spit it out.”

“We knew you weren’t supposed to be with Seth because of the guy you called about,” Stiles says, carefully gauging her reaction. Her spine goes a little stiff. “You called Derek the day of the Ceremonies talking about a guy with an orange bracelet. That wasn’t Seth. So who was he?”

Cora swallows hard. “You . . . you found him?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “His name is Isaac.” He takes out his phone and pulls up a picture. “He seems nice. Kind of shy and lonely.”

“He didn’t want me,” Cora says, wiping more tears off her cheeks. “I asked him but he didn’t want me.”

“No, it wasn’t that,” Stiles says. “His dad is really strict with him and told him that he wasn’t allowed to go to the Ceremonies. That’s why he turned you down. I think . . . I think he’s supposed to be with you, Cora. I can’t make any promises, you know, I can’t feel it like you can. But if you wanted to meet him, see what happens . . . I can arrange it.” He reaches out and squeezes her hands again. “Just think about it, okay?”

“I’m not sure I should be the one making that decision,” Cora says. “I, God, I feel so lonely. I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, then, let’s not do anything right away,” Stiles says. “Let’s just give you a few more days to feel a little better. But . . . if he really is your mate, the loneliness might not be because Seth is gone. It might be because you need Isaac. So let’s keep that in mind, okay?”

He gives her shoulder a gentle nudge. “Now come on, if you help me with my history, I might get it done in time to bake something loaded with chocolate for you tonight.”

Cora laughs despite herself. “Okay,” she says, “sounds good to me.”

~ ~ ~

Stiles doesn’t take the poster about Seth down, but he moves it off to the side. It takes two entirely blank pieces of posterboard to write down the highlights of everything Seth had told them. He’s talked to Danny, who was a little reluctant to get involved in more illegal hacking, but at least willing. He’s going to try to track down the IP addresses and any other relevant information of the e-mails Seth had received, the original posting, the changes to various internet sources that had established Seth’s fake identity.

What helped Seth be their enemy comes in handy now that he’s at least partially on their side. He’s intelligent and observant. That helped him figure out how to get underneath the Hale pack’s skin. But it also means that there were things about what was going on that he noticed, that his handlers probably didn’t realize he knew. He knew that Jack Babylon was rich from the watch he wore, the thousand-dollar suits that hung off his heavyset frame, the sound the engine of his fancy car made. He knew that Jack Babylon wasn’t in charge, because he never told Seth what to do in any sort of tricky situation without checking back with his own handlers first. He knew that Jack Babylon wasn’t actually an agent; he didn’t know enough of the lingo. If anything, Seth thought he was somewhat experienced in espionage. They always met in places like parks or malls, never somewhere like a coffee shop or anywhere that other people might notice him. Babylon had given him all the rules about what he could and couldn’t say over e-mail or the phone, about how to make sure he wasn’t being followed on his way to their meetings. (Apparently, it had not occurred to him at any point to instruct Seth to make sure there wasn’t anyone in his car.) He wasn’t a California native; Seth said he had more of a New England accent, softer and less obvious than Boston or New York, but still there.

Along with this information, they also had the drugs that Seth had been giving Cora. There were still three pills left in the bottle, and Talia had sent them out to a lab that belonged to a friend of a friend for analysis. Soon they would know what exactly Cora had been getting, and whether or not there was any way to track down where the drugs had come from.

The house in the woods that Seth had taken Cora to is empty. Laura and Aaron had taken a trip there a couple days after Seth’s arrest, since Peter couldn’t leave town, and reported that it had been cleaned out. Stiles wasn’t surprised. He wishes now that they had thought to check it for prints or evidence before cornering Seth, but there just hadn’t been time. The house is owned by an elderly woman that, upon investigation, died several years previous. The electricity bills were registered to Jack Babylon. So the house itself is a dead end, at least for now.

Stiles fills up the posters with all this information. Then he starts in on the alphas. He knows that Talia had spoken to a number of the ones around, but he also knows that Talia isn’t a Left Hand. He’ll do his own research. He starts with the ones that were the most damaged by the WLO, but doesn’t limit his research to that. He compiles as much information on them as he can.

He chews on his lower lip as he studies this list. The problem is that there are still two extremely different possible motives to this entire chain of events, and he isn’t sure which one is correct. There’s Peter’s supposition that they had intended to announce their results right before the next
Searching Ceremonies, destroying or at least damaging the proceedings. But there’s also Derek’s theory that they’re testing the waters to get sleeper agents inside packs.

Those two motives are basically mutually exclusive. Stiles leans towards Peter’s theory, simply because Seth had been asked to try to stay in the pack an entire year. But it’s also possible that Seth’s handlers had decided that so they could tout their success and sell their method right before the next set of Ceremonies, and get a rush of last-minute buyers, people who wanted to get in on the action without having a lot of time to think through the consequences.

But Babylon. Babylon is biblical. It’s destruction and chaos. And that points very strongly to Peter’s theory.

It’s also worth remembering that these people, whoever they are, were willing to kill to get what they wanted. They had killed Gerard Argent. And they had had to know that there was a strong possibility that Seth would end up dead. They simply hadn’t cared.

It’s the involvement of an alpha werewolf that has Stiles stymied. What would a werewolf gain by wanting to sabotage the Searching Ceremonies?

All of this is in his head while he puts together his posters, does his research. Aaron went down to Los Angeles to check out the offices where Seth had first met Jack Babylon. They’re empty, cleaned out, deserted. Stiles suspects that that happened as soon as Seth had been chosen for the role. These people cleaned up after themselves.

Peter still isn’t allowed out of Beacon Hills, and that has him extremely irritated. Tom has been working with the police down in Santa Rosa to clear his name, but Stiles suspects it’s going to be a long, drawn out process. Not for the first time, he wonders if the sheriff or the prosecutors down in Sonoma County are somehow involved, or at the very least on the take. He makes a mental note to look into it, in his copious free time, although he suspects that the possibility has already occurred to the adults involved.

Danny comes to his house on Thursday with a report. “So, the e-mails are useless,” he says. “Free wi-fi from a Starbucks in Burbank, a public library in LA, a Motel 6 in Riverside. The original headhunting ad was published to multiple sites around the internet but it was with a dynamic IP so there’s no way to track it down now. But,” he says, seeing Stiles’ face fall, “some of this hacking that was done to change articles and get Seth a driver’s license, et cetera, that was farmed out to a computer firm called One Click. If we could get to their records, we might be able to figure out who hired them to do the work.”

“Fantastic,” Stiles says. “I guess, uh, hacking into a hacking company’s records is probably not an option, right?”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen,” Danny agrees.

“Okay.” Stiles puts that aside to continue to mull it over.

In the meantime, he’s spending hours catching up on his schoolwork. He forced himself to bite the bullet and go see each and every one of his teachers, get a list of everything he needed to do, and negotiate due dates and points taken off for all of it. Then he sat down with it whenever he had a free minute and started to work through it. When he started losing words or getting frustrated, he just gets up and walks away from it for a little while. Works in the kitchen or harvests herbs from his new herb garden.

He apologizes to the pack and says he’s going to have to take a week off from most of the
denmaking until he can get his schoolwork in order. He buys a bunch of pre-cooked rotisserie chickens, loaves of bread, and bags of salad. Deli meat, pre-chopped vegetables and fruit. Store bought cookies. Melissa offers to make the pack dinner on Tuesday and they have an extra take-out night. His father’s ‘one week menu’ has been deferred until the summer, when he’ll have time.

He still makes Sunday brunch, though. He had missed it the previous week after everything that happened, so he really goes all out. There’s bacon and ham, sliced cheese, homemade waffles, along with a lot of fruit. Everyone sits around and stuffs themselves silly. Nobody talks about Seth or conspiracies or school. Afterwards they play several rounds of Scattergories and Balderdash. Stiles talks people into giving him extra points on the former (“I knew that word, I just couldn’t think of it”) until Tom tells him to stop taking advantage of them, and Stiles gives him a look so innocent that everyone laughs.

Cora is still a little quiet and subdued, but she smiles a lot more, and even laughs sometimes. While Stiles is alternating between doing his biology homework and making dinner, she says, “I don’t know. I just still feel so . . . empty. But I don’t think it’s about Seth. I mean, when I think of Seth, I feel this . . . this incandescent rage now. I don’t want him back, I don’t want to see him or be anywhere near him. So it’s not that I’m missing him. I just . . .”

Derek looks between Stiles and his sister and says, “Do you want to meet Isaac?”

“I’m . . . not sure,” Cora says, and then rests her head on Derek’s shoulder. “If you think it would help. You decide. Okay?”

“Okay,” Derek says, smoothing down her hair.

Stiles sure as hell isn’t about to introduce another variable without talking it over with Peter first. Peter, who’s been increasingly antsy the longer he’s forced to stay in Beacon Hills, just shrugs and says it’s fine with him, but to check with Talia. That’s approximately the last thing Stiles wants to do. He knows that Talia has gotten all the details about Seth, about the conspiracy, but he actually has no idea whether or not anyone ever told her about orange-bracelet-curly-hair. He thinks about trying to get his father to ask her, but then pictures the look on Tom’s face if he does that. Derek offers to go with him, but Stiles knows that he really needs to get over himself where interacting with Talia is concerned, so he decides to tackle it on his own.

Still, it’s with some trepidation that he approaches her in her study on Sunday evening. The room is surprisingly small, with a desk sandwiched in one corner and books along every wall. Talia is sitting behind the desk with a pile of papers, jotting down notes. Stiles knocks and timidly clears his throat, and she looks up and smiles. “Stiles, come on in,” she says. “Did you need something?”

“Yeah, well, sort of,” Stiles says. He plunks down in the chair across from her desk and says, “So, uh, I know Peter’s given you most of the scoop but I didn’t know if he had told you about Isaac at any point.”

Talia frowns slightly. “Well, the name doesn’t mean anything to me. Who’s Isaac?”

“He’s, uhm, I think he’s Cora’s actual mate,” Stiles says.

The confusion clears off her expression. “Oh, yes, the young man who turned her down just before she met Seth,” she says.

Relieved, Stiles says, “Yeah. Well, I tracked him down. And he, uh, he obviously really liked her. He just said no because he wasn’t supposed to be at the Ceremonies. I mean, his dad had told him that he couldn’t go until he improved his grades, and I guess he didn’t want to get into trouble?”
And I guess under normal circumstances . . .

“Cora would have lasted for about two days before she went looking for him,” Talia says, with a nod and a fond smile. “She’s not overly given to take no for an answer. But of course, that didn’t happen.”

“Yeah.” Stiles scrubbed a hand through his hair. “But Cora, she still feels really lonely and . . . sad. And I don’t think it’s because of Seth. So I thought I might have her meet Isaac again, and see what happens, but I didn’t want to do that without checking with you.”

Talia closes the folder of papers she’s been working on. “I trust your judgment, Stiles. If you think that would help Cora, then by all means. I think we’ll need to take things slowly, for a variety of reasons, but it’s been long enough now that if she feels ready and he’s willing, let’s do it.”

“Oh, uh, okay,” Stiles says, flushed pink, barely having heard anything past ‘I trust your judgment’. “I thought, uh, I thought it might be better if there were fewer people. Like, you know, the first couple times I came here. Not that I think you won’t, uh, won’t like him. Or, uh, let me take my foot out of my mouth and try that again . . .”

Talia’s smiling faintly despite herself. “I know what you mean, Stiles. We’re an intimidating bunch. Well, this Friday, I have an afternoon meeting with several people in Santa Rosa about Peter. Aaron was going to come with me, and we can certainly grab dinner there before heading back home. I’ll talk to Laura. She’s been talking about taking the kids down to see Jon’s sister in San Diego for a few days now that the weather is nicer; I don’t see any reason why that can’t be this coming weekend. You’ll have to deal with Peter yourself. He’s not going to be coming to the meeting.”

“I can handle Peter, I think,” Stiles says, and lets out a sigh of relief. “Okay. Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me, Stiles.” She reaches out and squeezes one of his hand. Her voice is somewhat stilted and awkward as she says, “I know it’s still not easy for you to . . . to come to me when you need something. I’m glad you did.”

Stiles flushes bright pink. “Well, I uh, I’m going to go . . . be super embarrassed now, bye!” he blurts out, and stumbles out of her study and back into the kitchen.

Derek looks up as he comes in, and arches his eyebrows, then huffs out a soft laugh and kisses Stiles on the crown of his head. “So?” he says.

“Your mother trusts my judgment,” Stiles says, “and that, more than anything else in this entire misadventure, scares the crap out of me.”

Derek shakes his head a little, but he’s still laughing. “So we’re on?” he says.

Stiles nods and rubs his hands together and says, “Let’s play matchmaker.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

In addition to making up stuff about the medical field, now I’m making stuff up about law, too! =D

Isaac is just leaving the high school when he hears the honking of a car horn and looks up to see Stiles leaning out of his Jeep. “Hey!” he calls, tumbling out of his Jeep with an awkward sort of grace. Derek gets out behind him, looking as foreboding as ever. “Hey, what’s up? Got a sec?”

“Uh, sure.” He’s a bit startled and confused, because while Stiles has shown up at school to pick him up before, it’s usually not out of the blue. He shrugs a little and heads over to them. “What’s up?”

“Are you hungry?” Stiles asks. He seems a little more twitchy than usual. “I want to talk to you about this thing I’m doing this weekend that you’re invited to and I’m starved, let’s go get a pizza.”

Isaac smiles and nods. He’s never one to turn down food he doesn’t have to cook himself, not even getting into the fact that he seems to have actual friends now, which is still something of a novelty.

Ten minutes later, they’re settled into a pizzeria downtown and Stiles has ordered a large deep dish with pepperoni and sausage. He remarks that he’s glad it’s leftovers night and nobody will care if he’s not hungry at dinner time. Then he says, “Sooooo . . . if you wanna come over this Friday, I’m making the best pot roast you will ever eat.”

Isaac pauses, about to take a bite of pizza. “That sounds like just dinner, not a ‘thing’.” He phrases it like a statement, but it’s easy to hear the question in it, and his eyes narrow ever so slightly in suspicion.

“We-e-e-e-ell, Cora would be there, and things are kind of complicated and I was trying to ease us into it, but,” Stiles flaps a hand, “obviously that isn’t going to work, so I’ll just start at the beginning. That guy you saw Cora leave the Ceremonies with isn’t her mate.”

Isaac blinks at this and looks to Derek. “But . . . I thought you guys didn’t make mistakes.” It doesn’t come off as rude so much as confused.

Derek lets out a breath. “We don’t. It wasn’t a mistake. It was . . . she was manipulated. There was magic and drugs involved. We still don’t have all the answers to why or how it happened.”

“Is she . . . is she okay?” he blurs out. He had read all the pamphlets and such before going to the Ceremonies. He knows how much this all means to the werewolves. Cora had seemed so nice and sweet and . . . everything he would want in a girl, when he had met her at the Ceremonies. He can’t imagine someone trying to hurt her like that.

“She’s upset,” Derek says, understating the case for Isaac’s sake. “But she’s okay, or at least we think she’s going to be okay.”
“Anyway, she liked you, when she met you,” Stiles says, “so we think there was like, supposed to be a thing? And I know, your dad doesn’t want you dating, but we thought it might help her to meet you and, I don’t know, see what happens.”

Isaac wants to leap at the chance, but the thought of how angry his father might get stops him. "And what if there . . . is . . . a thing.” His father won’t care if he and Cora are meant to be together. Then again, does he have to tell his father? He could just neglect to mention it.

Stiles rubs his hand over the back of his head. “I’m not gonna lie, man. Cora’s pretty messed up by this whole thing. I think we would definitely be in the ‘taking things slow’ realm. If she likes you, and you like her, great, we can all hang out together and see how we feel about it. But there’s not going to be any weddings or contracts, you know?”

“So even if we do hit it off it’s still just friends. Sort of.” That works for him. He’s allowed to go out with friends sometimes.

“At least for now,” Derek says with a nod. “Anything else, you two would talk about together.”

“Does she know you’re trying to kinda set us up? Or whatever?” He’s suddenly nervous about meeting her again. After all, he was the one that had said no before. Maybe she would even be mad because if he hadn’t, she wouldn’t have met the other guy.

“Well, she knows that we think you were supposed to be her mate,” Stiles says, “and she knows we’re going to have you come over and introduce you so you two can, you know, maybe make friends and stuff. You know, presuming that you agree.”

“You promise its the best pot roast I’ve ever eaten, right? What do I win if you’re wrong?” Isaac asks, although he doubts that Stiles is wrong.

“If I’m wrong, I will streak naked across the field at your next lacrosse game,” Stiles says.

“You’ll what?” Derek blurts.

Isaac smiles. “You have a deal.”

Stiles smirks at both of them. “C’mon. Der. It’s my pot roast.” He’s clearly unconcerned about losing this bet. Derek just shakes his head at them, but he’s laughing. “Okay, cool. We’re on. It’s gonna be awesome. You’ll see.”

~ ~ ~

Talia is getting heartily sick of the road between Beacon Hills and Santa Rosa. She feels like she has every twist and turn memorized. It’s an exaggeration, surely; she’s really only been to Santa Rosa half a dozen times. But it feels like she might as well get a second apartment there. This drive has been particularly unpleasant, as she’s spending it in a police cruiser. Not under arrest, of course, but Seth is attending this meeting, which means appropriate transportation must be taken.

She could have ridden with Aaron, but she wants to brainstorm with Tom about how they’re going to handle the people in Santa Rosa. They’ve been going back and forth on it all week, and she wants to make sure that they’ve got all their ducks in a row. Seth has been given a pair of headphones and extremely loud music, although Talia doubts very much that he’s going to cause
them any trouble. Peter had had a little chat with him before they departed, and Seth currently has
the complexion of cottage cheese.

Of course, Peter was annoyed at her because she wasn’t letting him attend the meeting. “I’m the
one facing the firing squad,” he pointed out. “I think my presence would be appropriate.”

“Yes, it would be,” Talia says, “and that’s exactly why you’re not going. Because we’re going to
show these people exactly how little regard we have for their accusations. You don’t need to come
because this meeting isn’t about you.”

Peter was still irritated, but he let it go. Talia knows he doesn’t care about the meeting; he just
wants to get out of Beacon Hills for a little while. It’s a small enough town that he gets bored there.
Peter was always born to wander, and since the fire, the need has been even stronger in him. That’s
not the only problem, though. The anklet is a constant reminder to Peter that he could wind up back
in prison. Talia knows that Peter is trying not to let on how much that possibility terrifies him, but
she knows her brother, and she knows that sooner or later, he’s going to snap.

Both Tom and Omar, Peter’s lawyer, have been on the phone all week, and haven’t made any
headway. The police and prosecutors in Santa Rosa are sticking to their metaphorical guns. Until
they have solid proof that Peter wasn’t involved, the charges won’t be dropped. Tom could have
continued to argue with them, but Talia wants it official, so they’ve called for a court hearing. The
judge isn’t friendly, and she knows she’s not going to win. She just wants it on the record.

In fact, as they file into the courtroom, Judge Harrelson looks mostly annoyed, and he barks “be
seated” almost as soon as the bailiff has said “now rise”. He tugs out a pair of reading glasses and
says, “Here today to hear a motion to dismiss in the State of California Vs. Peter Hale.” He
narrow his eyes at Omar, Peter’s lawyer. “Mr. Guerrero, I’ve heard this motion before. I didn’t
grant it then, and I’m not inclined to grant it now. The grand jury indicted Mr. Hale, and I have yet
to hear a compelling reason to overturn their decision.”

“Your Honor, we have new evidence,” Omar says, rising to his feet. “My client recently discovered
that a visitor to his house, Seth Youngstown, lifted his fingerprints and passed them on to a third
party who had a vested interest in Mr. Hale being incarcerated. Mr. Youngstown has signed an
affidavit to this purpose and copies have been submitted to both the police and the prosecutors.”

“I’ve seen it,” Harrelson says.

“Then, since the fingerprints are the only evidence that tie my client to the scene of the crime, we
would like to request that the charges be dismissed.”

Harrelson looks between Omar, where Sheriff Stilinski and Talia and Aaron are sitting in the first
row behind him, and then at the prosecutor, a sharply dressed woman named Nila Vegunta. “The
prosecution’s position?”

She rose to her feet smoothly. “As stated in our response, we see no reason to find the affidavit
credible.”

Omar turned to her and said, “Is the prosecution familiar with the definition of the word
‘affidavit’?”

Vegunta looked not at him, but at Talia and Tom sitting behind him. “It is the prosecution’s
position that, given the resources at their disposal, this affidavit could have been coerced.”

Talia’s jaw tightens, but it’s Tom, with his deep-seated integrity, that half-rises to his feet. Talia
grabs him by the wrist and makes him sit back down. Even Harrelson looks vaguely disgruntled, adjusting his glasses and looking down at the woman. “That’s quite an accusation to make in open court, Ms. Vegunta.”

“I’m aware of the implications, Your Honor.”

Omar interrupts. “If the affidavit isn’t enough, Mr. Youngstown is here in court and prepared to testify to his involvement – ”

“I doubt that will satisfy the prosecution’s concerns,” Harrelson replies. “My own concern is the vagueness of the statement. He passed these prints onto a ‘third party’? Why have you declined to identify this person?”

“We haven’t been able to ascertain their identity yet, Your Honor.”

“Well, if Mr. Youngstown is here, surely he should be able to shed some light on the subject.”

“Unfortunately, everything was done through intermediaries,” Omar says, “so no, he can’t. As soon as we identify the person or organization that has gone to such lengths to frame my client, we will be happy to supply that information. At the moment, however, we’re not able to do so.”

“Well, until you do, I’m not inclined to dismiss the charges,” Harrelson says. “All Mr. Youngstown can say is that he gave the fingerprints to someone else. There’s no proof that they, in turn, planted them in Gerard Argent’s house. The case will proceed as scheduled.” He raps his gavel down as if to say that he doesn’t want to hear further arguments.

Talia grimaces as Omar gives her an apologetic look. The prosecuting lawyer rises to her feet with a smug smile and exits the court room without another word. Talia follows her, with Tom on her heels. “Ms. Vegunta,” Talia calls after her, “may I have a word, please?”

“I’ve said everything I have to say,” she says, but she half-turns, smirking. It looks like she’s relishing the idea of a confrontation.

“Oh, I’m well aware of that,” Talia says, “I just wanted to ask if you wanted me to file a complaint with the bar now, or if you had a specific date in mind.”

Vegunta’s smile doesn’t waver. “Don’t you want to take it to the press first? Isn’t that what you do? Throw your weight around, make sure everyone knows damned well how special you are? Don’t forget to mention that you’re an alpha werewolf. The public will be on your side in no time.”

“If you say so,” Vegunta says, and walks past them without another word.

“God damn it,” Tom swears.

Talia sighs and pushes a hand through her hair. “Well, Peter will be pissed, but we’ll just save it for
the jury. It only takes reasonable doubt. He’s not going to get convicted, not with this much evidence against it.”

“It just – it pisses me off,” Tom growls.

“I know,” Talia says, and she does know. Tom Stilinski has a deep commitment to justice. Corruption in law enforcement or the judicial system burns him in a way that she’ll never fully understand. “We’ll find a way to stick it to them. But she’s right. If we take it to the press, they’ll whine about how we’re using our influence to bully them. It’ll only make things worse. We’ll keep quiet, change venues if we can, and then yank their pants down in front of the jury.”

Tom sighs. “All right. I’ll get Seth back to Beacon Hills. Enjoy your dinner date, if you can.”

“I’ll do my best.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Roger Lahey looks up as Isaac is trying to slide out the front door unnoticed. He had told his father the previous day that he had plans with friends, so technically this was allowed. But of course, his father looks up and barks, “Where d’you think you’re going?”

Isaac mentally scrambles for an answer. “Out with my friends from the lacrosse team,” he says. Lacrosse is an approved activity. It’s not even completely a lie. He had been on the lacrosse team with Scott, albeit briefly.

Roger grunts. “Chores done?” he asks.

“Yes, sir.” He could also offer up that his homework was done even though it was only Friday, and he had cooked the dinner his father was currently eating, but it never pays to speak out of turn, so he waits.

There’s a pause long enough to make him sweat. He can’t even imagine what would happen if he has to call Stiles and cancel. What would Cora think? She would never want to see him after that. Then Roger says, “Get your ass in here by ten. There’s three burials tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” he repeats, and slips out the door. He makes sure not to be too fast. His father will call him back if he thinks he’s trying to bolt. He almost wilts with relief once he’s out of his father’s sight. Derek had agreed to pick him up, but he wants to be in the front yard waiting when he gets there. God forbid that he come up and ring the bell. So he winds up waiting for about ten minutes until the Camaro pulls up, and he folds himself, storklike, into the low-slung vehicle. “Uh, hi.”

“Hey,” Derek says, taking a cautious breath and smelling the anxiety rolling off of Isaac. He’s smart enough not to say anything about it. “I hope you’re hungry. Stiles is cooking enough food for an army.”

“Doesn’t he have an army to feed?” Isaac asks jokingly, as he does his seat belt.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Derek says. “But my parents are actually out with some friends, and my older sister and her husband and kids are staying the weekend at his sister’s place. So it’ll be a smaller crew than usual.”
Isaac nods. That means no adults aside from Derek, if one counts Derek, and he doesn’t exactly. That makes him a little less nervous. He’s never sure how to act around other people’s parents. He’s also relieved when Derek lets things lapse into silence. He’s noticed that about Derek, that he’s just not a talker a lot of the time. He listens to Stiles ramble with a fond expression on his face, so other people talking clearly doesn’t bother him, but he’s not like that. When he’s got something to say, he says it, and then he’s done. Isaac is happy to watch the scenery pass by in silence.

“Cora’s pretty nervous,” Derek finally says, as they pull onto the access road that leads out onto the preserve.

“I’m pretty nervous,” Isaac blurts out in response. Then he forces himself to look nonchalant. “I just want to get to know her. I’m not . . . expecting anything.”

Derek nods. He’s quiet for another minute, tapping at the steering wheel. “What happened with Seth . . . she’s still recovering from that. So I want to make sure you understand, if she reacts badly, it’s not because of you. She might run away when you show up, or cry, or just . . . please don’t hold it against her.”

“Okay.” He takes a deep breath. He can try to remember that. It’s not personal. “Just, someone needs to tell me if I do something wrong, okay?” he says, because if Cora’s reactions can’t be trusted, he won’t know if he’s actually fucked up.

Derek glances at him, then nods. And then there’s no more time to be nervous because he’s pulling up alongside the house. Isaac takes a few moments just to marvel at it. He had known, intellectually, that it had to be big. It houses six adults, two teenagers, and two children. But it really is huge. The front porch alone is bigger than his living room. He follows Derek out of the car and into the house. It smells really good inside, and Scott immediately bounds out of the kitchen like a puppy drunk on sunshine to say hello.

“Hey,” Isaac says, smiling. He likes Scott a lot, actually, and wishes that they could have been better friends before Scott had left for Super High. He can understand why Scott had taken the opportunity even before he had become a werewolf. Isaac thinks sometimes that being socially invisible isn’t so bad, and is certainly better than the alternative.

While Scott and Allison are saying hi, Derek slips into the kitchen. He comes back a moment later to say, “Dinner’s going to be about ten minutes, so, we should probably start setting the table.”

Isaac moves forward with Allison and Scott, clearly ready to help. “It smells really great.”

“Of course it does!” Stiles says cheerfully, as they come into the kitchen. “I did make a promise. Hey, Isaac. Plates, silverware – Allison, can you get the iced tea and the milk out of the fridge – napkins there –”

Isaac grabs a stack of plates from Scott and starts putting them on the table. “So I guess I won’t see you in all your naked glory.”

“Not in public, at least,” Stiles says, amused. He hands Derek a dish of butter and a bowl of potatoes, and the werewolf silently carries them over to the table. Everything is so busy and chaotic that Isaac almost misses it when Cora shows up. She doesn’t quite come into the room, but stands just in the doorway, looking like she might bolt at any sudden noise. She’s dressed in a loose Henley that looks like it probably belonged to her brother at some point, jeans, and a sweater. There are dark smudges under her eyes and it looks like she’s been chewing on her lower lip to the point of raggedness.
When Isaac sees her, he offers a smile, because just the sight of her perks up his mood even though she’s clearly had a rough time of it. Other than that, he leaves her be, because that’s what everyone else is doing so he figures it’s probably the way to go. She creeps into the room bit by bit, and settles into a chair that Derek pulls out for her just as Stiles is setting the last of the serving dishes on the table. Her gaze darts to Isaac and she bites on her lip. “Um, hi,” she offers, not quite looking at him.

“Hi,” he replies. “It, uh, it’s nice to see you again.” He feels awkward and shy, and he doesn’t want to crowd her, so he turns to Stiles. “Where am I supposed to sit?” he asks, because he’s pretty sure it isn’t next to Cora.

Stiles just nudges the chair next to Scott, which puts him across and one over from Cora. That’s good. They can look at each other but won’t have to look at each other. The others are settling into their seats, starting to pass the food around. Isaac sits, loads his plate up along with everyone else, and tries not to look at Cora too often. He thinks he does okay. Every once in a while, he glances at her and sees that she's just staring at him. Whenever that happens, she jerks her gaze away and focuses on back on her plate.

The others try to keep them both distracted. Stiles is talking a mile a minute about a mystery he’s trying to solve for either a duke or a guy named Duke; Isaac isn’t sure which. Something about poisoned babies, which really doesn’t seem to be good dinner table conversation. Allison and Scott are making calf eyes at each other. And it’s hard to be gloomy when he’s eating the world’s best pot roast. One of the times he catches Cora’s stare, he smiles at her but doesn’t say anything. Instead he waits for Stiles to pause for breath, then asks about Duke, because he feels like that’s something he should clear up.

“Oh, his name’s actually Deucalion,” Stiles says, “but he goes by Duke, because wow, who wouldn’t, right? And he’s helping research some cases that might have had WLO involvement, and I’m like his research monkey.”

“You make it sound like it’s fun,” Isaac says. He can’t imagine enjoying being a research anything.

“Well, I like puzzles,” Stiles says.

“And he’s super good at it, too,” Scott chimes in. “You’ve gotten what, like, eleven cases solved so far?”

“Oh, WLO cases, yeah,” Stiles says. “We’ve found something like eight more members of the WLO that we hadn’t been able to track down before.”

“Man, I can barely solve my homework half the time,” Isaac says, shaking his head. “So . . . you’ve solved other cases, too? Like, for your dad and stuff?”

“Well, like the case of Kate Argent and everything,” Stiles says. He darts a glance at Cora. “You know, uh, family stuff.”

Cora stirs gravy into her potatoes and murmurs, “Stiles figured out what Seth was doing to me,” without looking up.

Isaac isn’t exactly sure what to say to that, although in a way it’s a relief that it’s no longer an elephant in the room. So he goes with his first reaction when he found out. “I’m really sorry that happened to you.”

He doesn’t expect much response, if any. Cora rubs at her eyes a little and says, “Yeah, me too.”
Derek reaches over and squeezes her by the shoulder.

Isaac isn’t sure what to say to that, but he’s saved by Scott, who just fluidly changes the subject to some idiot who had called the vet’s office that day about his puppy losing baby teeth. That gets them onto a string of anecdotes, and apparently, cute puppy stories were exactly what Cora needed, because she starts to perk up a bit. She even smiles at one point, although only briefly. Isaac sees the dish of pot roast going around another time and hesitantly reaches for it. Nobody slaps his hand, so he helps himself to seconds. Then he tells a story about Finstock’s ridiculous pre-game speeches. “It’s gotten so bad that other teams are coming to witness them now.”

“Oh, man, Finstock is like the *one* thing I miss about Beacon Hills High,” Stiles says. “You should’ve seen it when he came out to ‘supervise’ one of my self-defense sessions with Laura so he could agree that it would count as a physical education credit. He spent the entire time narrating it like a game of Mortal Kombat; I thought Laura was going to kill him.”

Scott starts laughing. “No, I miss him, too. I mean, he never let me play, but remember that time he said he couldn’t let me on the field because if I died he’d have to flee the country to escape my mom?”

“Dude, who wouldn’t be afraid of your mother,” Stiles says. “Your mother is hardcore. Tell Isaac that story about the guy who came in with chest pains but really just wanted a sandwich . . .”

They continue to chat for a few more minutes while everyone cleans their plates. Isaac finds that he’s relaxing, that he feels warm and content. It’s a strange feeling, but he likes it, a lot.

“Dessert?” Stiles asks, standing up.

“You want help?” Allison asks.

“Just clear the table off, if you would,” Stiles says, and Allison nods and starts collecting plates. Cora’s is still half full, and she stands up to bring it into the kitchen. Isaac starts to get up to help, but then stops. He doesn’t want Cora to think that he’s trying to get pushy. Scott seems to see what he’s doing, and hands him a stack of little plates to hand around while Stiles produces a pie from the kitchen.

Cora comes back with a handful of forks. She tucks her hair behind her ear and asks, “Do you . . . do you like pecan pie, Isaac?”

Isaac nods. “Though it’s been a long time since I’ve had any,” he adds. His father prefers pumpkin pie at the holidays, so that’s what Isaac makes.

“Ice cream?” Derek asks, dumping a carton of vanilla and a scoop onto the table.

“Is that a *question*?” Allison asks, laughing.

“Yes, ice cream,” Isaac agrees. He fills up the bowl he’s given, then holds it out to Cora somewhat hesitantly. She reaches out and takes it. Their fingers brush against each other. Abruptly, Cora drops the ice cream and pushes her chair backwards, which makes it give a horrible screeching noise against the tile floor.

“I – I can’t – I’m sorry –” she blurts out, and then bolts from the room.

Isaac blinks after her, frozen for a moment. “Was that something I did? Or – or should I take a deep breath?”
“I think it was just too much – she stayed longer than I thought she would have,” Derek says, and he’s already on his feet, following her.

“Okay.” Isaac sits down. “Just wanted to be sure.” He can’t help but look in the direction that Cora went wistfully.

“Actually, I think that went really well,” Stiles says, and there’s a note of profound relief mixed with weariness in his voice.

Isaac isn’t sure how Cora’s been recently if this was considered ‘good’. “I’ll take your word on it.”

“She probably won’t come back down,” Stiles says. “But . . . don’t feel bad, okay? It’s not you. She’s just having a rough time of it. And to be honest, if she hadn’t liked you or thought you were as awesome as you obviously think she is, she probably wouldn’t have had a reaction like that.”

After a long moment, Isaac turns to frown at Stiles. “How does her running away mean she likes me? I mean, I won’t take it personally and from what you’ve told me she’s got a right to her issues, but . . .”

Stiles pushes both hands through his hair, leaving it standing in lopsided spikes. “Look. You’re her mate. Okay? Let’s all just accept that as a working hypothesis. So when she saw you, she felt it. She knew. But after what just happened with Seth, that really fucked her up. She doesn’t trust her senses anymore, doesn’t know how to react. If she’d seen you and you’d just been some random dude, she wouldn’t have gotten upset.”

“Because then I wouldn’t have mattered at all.” Isaac nods. “Okay, that makes sense.” He starts eating his ice cream, because he isn’t in the habit of wasting food.

“So it’s all good,” Scott says, with his eternal optimism. “You two can just take it slow, and we’ll get it all worked out!”

“Right,” Isaac says, because it’s not like he’s allowed to date anyway. Stiles just shakes his head at both of them and laughs.

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Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

This chapter was written in an effort to be pretty much solidly adorable.

Also Isaac+scarves = OTP

Also also this chapter is vaguely NSFW, it's pretty vague but they're totally doin' it.
(and by 'they' I mean Sterek, not Cora and Isaac)

Derek finds Cora upstairs in her own bathroom, kneeling beside the toilet and throwing up everything she just ate. He kneels beside her, holds her hair out of her face, and waits until she’s done. Then he offers her a box of tissues. She takes one and blows her nose, but doesn’t say anything. Instead, she crawls into Derek’s lap, pressing her face into his shoulder. Her eyes are red-rimmed and she’s trembling.

Derek leans against the wall, content to settle in. He hugs her and smoothes down her hair. “We’ll get you through this.”

“I wanted . . .” Cora chokes out the words. “I kind of wanted to dive across the table and rub my scent all over him.”

“That’s actually pretty normal,” Derek tries to reassure her.

“No, I, I know that,” Cora says, “but I wanted to do the same thing to Seth and that’s – that’s why I suddenly felt sick. Derek, I don’t – I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can.” Derek kisses her on the top of her head and remembers all the times she sat with him and kept his spirits up while he was trapped in bed after the fire. “But no one needs you to do anything quickly. He won’t go anywhere.”

Cora hiccups a little and says, “He’s nice, huh?”

“Yeah. Kinda shy.” He lets that sit for a moment. “Everyone that’s met him so far has liked him.” He wants her to know that they all agree with her. That she can trust her own judgment.

“Has . . . has Peter met him? Or mom?” Cora asks, her voice wavering.

“No. Though . . .” Derek shrugs. “Peter. I wouldn’t make any bets on Peter even though I know we haven’t introduced them.”

Cora nods a little. She swallows and says, “What . . . what should I do now?”

“Whatever you want. You could come back down. But if you aren’t ready, no one will hold it against you.”

“I don’t want him to think I don’t like him,” Cora blurts out. “What if he leaves? What if he doesn’t come back? I want him to stay but then I think – all these crazy things and I’m so confused and I just – he seems – perfect.”
“If he leaves, he’ll come back. And I don’t think he was ready to bolt out the door.” Derek pets her hair again. “And I think he is perfect. For you. Since it’s obvious that Stiles is the only perfect person,” he adds, his voice teasing.

Cora looks up at him solemnly and says, “He keeps a collection of your toddler pictures on his phone.”

There’s a pause. “Right. You can have the perfect one. I have to go beat Stiles with his own phone.”

Cora smiles for the first time, and looks like herself again. “I’m just going to – to stay up here. But I want – I want Isaac to – to carry my scent. Do you think – would that be okay?”

“Yeah, I think he’d like that.” There’s a pause, and then Derek teases, “Might take a little work. Your clothes won’t fit him very well.”

“I guess not,” Cora says, with a wobbly laugh, and manages to get to her feet. She goes back out into her room and starts poking around. She comes up with a soft wool scarf. It’s just a plain navy blue, so it’s not girly, and she’s worn it frequently over the winter. “How – how about this? Do you think he’d like it?”

Derek nods. “I think so. Do you want me to take it to him?”

“Will you? Please?”

Derek nods again and holds out a hand. “Should I let him know you’d like to see him again?”


“Like I was much better with Stiles.” He takes the scarf and kisses her on the forehead. “You want me to stay with you or go back down now?”

“I guess you’d better go let everyone know I’m okay,” she says.

“Give me a shout if you need me to come back,” he says, clearly a little reluctant to leave her. But she nods, so he heads back down the stairs. The others are still eating dessert, although Stiles has put the ice cream back into the freezer so it doesn’t melt while they wait for him. Four questioning looks in a variety of anxiousness look up at him as he comes back into the kitchen.

“She’s okay. Just overwhelmed, I think.” He sits back down, not wanting to loom over Isaac. “She did ask me to give you this, though.” He bundles the scarf up and passes it over to Isaac.

His hands smooth out over the wool, and he looks up, frowning faintly. “A . . . scarf?”

“It’s . . . we like our mate to carry our scent.” Derek settles in to explain. “To show a connection between us. The easiest way is by touch. But sharing clothes happens a lot, too. It’s just that Cora’s wardrobe wouldn’t look all that flattering on you, so she’s giving you that.”

“Oh.” Isaac brightens a little, fingers knotting in the fabric. “She wants me to have it?”

Derek nods. “Yeah. And she’d like you to come back for another visit.” It suddenly occurs to him how that sounded, and he frowns. “Not that anyone thinks you need to leave. But she did say she’d like it if you visited again.”
“Okay.” Isaac wraps the scarf around his neck even though they’re indoors, and gives them a puppyish smile. “What do you think? How’s it look?”

Allison peers around Scott and smiles. “Actually, I think it looks good. Very stylish,” she says, and her tone is genuine, not teasing at all.

“Well, you would know better than the rest of us,” Stiles says. He looks over at Derek and says, “You want your dessert?”

“Are you kidding?” Derek asks, sliding back into his chair next to Stiles.

They wind up watching a movie after dinner, and at one point Derek looks over to see Cora in the doorway, just watching them. She doesn’t join them, but she does give him a hesitant little smile before she turns and retreats back up the stairs.

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Stiles glances up as there’s a knock on the door to the spare room and sees his dad standing there, still in his uniform. It’s Wednesday, leftover night, so he’s gone to his own house after school to get some homework done and work on his mystery wall. Derek has said he’s going to come over after work, but he has deliveries to make so it probably won’t be until six or six thirty.

“Hey,” Stiles says, chewing on his pencil. “You hungry? I brought home half of a chicken pot pie from the den.”

“Yeah, I could eat,” Tom says, walking in and looking up and down the posters. “How’s it coming in here?”

“Uh, not too bad,” Stiles says. “I’m working on getting more information about that computer company that did some work for them. Talia told me that the hearing didn’t go well.”

Tom grimaces. “Yeah, it’s not every day I get straight-up accused of corruption in a courtroom,” he says, and when he sees Stiles scowl, he says, “Don’t worry about it. I can handle being insulted. We have more important things to worry about.”

“Yeah, that’s the truth,” Stiles says, but actually he’s feeling pretty good. His grades are coming back up. He’s back into his normal groove. And Isaac and Cora’s first – well, technically second – meeting had gone better than he had expected. Cora might not be sure of how to handle her feelings, but she obviously has them. For someone who had said she didn’t want to rush into things, she’s asked when Isaac will come over again a lot of times in the past four days. Stiles wants to keep things to big groups for a while, so there’s plenty of buffer between them. There’s another lacrosse game this weekend that he’s invited Isaac to, so Cora will see him then.

“How are things coming with that nursery case?” Tom asks, sinking into the room’s sole chair.

Stiles blinks at him. “I, uh, I haven’t actually worked on it since the last time we talked about it. Priorities, remember?”

“You actually listened to the things I said during that conversation?” Tom says. “Hell, son, this might call for an actual party.”
“Gee, thanks,” Stiles says with a snort. “I was actually thinking of checking back in on it tonight. I had gathered a bunch of articles and stuff to read but hadn’t had a chance to wade through it yet. But then Derek is coming over, so I’ll probably end up . . . not working on it. Why d’you ask, anyway?”

“Well, I guess I was just curious,” Tom says. “I mean, that case is over six years old. Finding a new lead on a case like that, it’s kind of exciting, don’t you think?”

“Of course I think that,” Stiles says, blinking at him. He’s realizing all of a sudden that his father is just as keyed up about this as he is. More than that, his father is **proud** of him. All of his lectures about time management and priorities aside, his father is one hundred percent thrilled that Stiles is working on actual cases and solving them. Somewhat hesitantly, he says, “Do you . . . want to work on it together?”

“Sure,” his dad says, with a smile that Stiles knows means ‘hell yes I do’.

“Okay, let me just, uh – ” Stiles shoves some of his other stuff aside and dives into the box. It takes him a few minutes to get everything assembled. His dad has only a passing familiarity with the case, so he starts at the beginning, explaining what had happened, identifying the various involved parties, then going over the police investigation.

“So I was basically just looking up all the parents on the Lexis-Nexis to see what all of them were up to since then,” he says. “And this one, this Leo Stewart, there was a missing persons report filed on him about five years later. So I figure there are three options. The first and most likely is that it’s totally unrelated. I mean, maybe he decided to go live in the woods or something, who knows. The second is that he was involved in the crime somehow and needed to run. And the third is that he was trying to solve it himself, found something, and got himself killed. And that’s the one I’m trying to focus on.”

Tom watches his son during this summary, noting how fluidly he’s speaking, how firm and sure of himself he is. He smiles a little and says, “Okay. Why?”

“Well, because I’ve found some evidence that he was looking into it. See, originally he was a professional photographer. But after what happened, he actually got his license as a private investigator. He and his wife separated, but they didn’t get divorced, and I think he might have left to try to protect her. She’s the one who filed the missing persons report after she didn’t hear from him for a week, so they were obviously still pretty close. He had petitioned for the Vidocq Society to look at the case, and they actually did, although they didn’t solve it. That was two years before he disappeared. And here’s the kicker. Six months before he disappeared, he abruptly closed his private investigation firm. And that’s it. Radio silence. So where did he go, and what was he doing, for those six months?”

“Let’s find out,” Tom says, and they start going through the new information that Stiles has compiled.

By the time Derek shows up at quarter past six, they’ve moved downstairs because there’s only one chair in the spare room and it’s a terrible chair. They’ve spread everything out over the kitchen table and are debating animatedly over the various importance of some different theories. Derek looks at him and almost laughs. “What’s all this?”

“We are solving crime!” Stiles says, gesturing with a highlighter. “Check this out,” he adds, and starts to rattle off a bunch of different theories. Derek winds up sitting next to him, rubbing one hand up and down his back, listening to Stiles and his father debate but not really taking part. It’s not a subject he’s familiar with, and he thinks maybe Stiles and Tom just need some father-son
At about eight PM, Tom has a list of inquiries to make. Stiles is amped up and excited, but his father is winding down, starting to yawn. Stiles tries to persuade him to give some of his other cases from Duke back, since he’s “clearly on a roll” but Tom tells him to redirect that roll into studying. “Ha, yeah, like that’s gonna happen,” Stiles says, as he grabs Derek by the hand and drags him up the stairs.

Derek goes along with this, somewhat amused, as Stiles shoves the bedroom door shut and practically attacks him. He’s a flurry of hands and lips as he strips Derek’s shirt off and grabs at his hair. Derek learned months ago that Stiles can be difficult to predict in the bedroom, and he loves that. Sometimes things are slow and sweet and tender, other times Stiles just wants to be held down and screwed silly, and sometimes Stiles is like this, one-hundred-percent horny, excited teenager that grabs for anything he can reach and tries to leave enormous hickeys on Derek’s neck even though they always fade away.

That’s the mood he’s in today, and they stumble around the bedroom, knocking over Stiles’ chair and shoving a pile of books off his desk so Derek can hoist him up to sit on the edge. Stiles practically climbs onto him in an effort to get as close as possible and it turns into a loud, messy makeout session that seems to last forever.

Derek tries to get them to the bed but trips over a pile of dirty laundry and they wind up sprawled out onto the floor, both of them laughing. They roll around a few times and then Derek tries to get them up onto the bed but sort of forgets about what he’s doing when he’s dragged himself halfway up and Stiles take the opportunity to start biting the back of his neck and licking along his spine. “I love your butt,” Stiles says, and Derek huffs out a laugh. “You have the most awesome butt I’ve ever seen.”

“How many butts have you seen?” Derek asks, still laughing, but then he gets distracted again because Stiles is fumbling around for the lube and as usual, just the thought of Stiles’ clever, nimble fingers is enough to make his brain go into complete shutdown mode.

“Can I – ”

“Oh Jesus yes,” Derek says, grabbing the pillow from the head of the bed and dragging it down towards himself, mindful of the fact that Tom is right downstairs. He arches into Stiles’ touch, making fists in the fabric of the sheets. Despite his enthusiasm, Stiles is always careful when he does this, slow and gentle, even though Derek’s overall durability probably renders it unnecessary. Derek isn’t sure if he does it to make sure Derek’s okay, or if he just enjoys teasing him. Either way, it’s a success. By the time Stiles is finally inside him, he’s moaning into the pillow and grabbing at the sheets in huge handfuls, trying to keep from shredding them with his claws.

Afterwards, they wind up sprawled out on the floor, cuddling sleepily. Derek thinks he might fall asleep for a while, because he’s only half-aware of it when Stiles pulls out of his arms and gets up. He stirs a little and dozes off again until he hears Stiles start typing. Then he opens his eyes. “What are you up to over there?”

“Oh, crime?” Stiles says, with an unsure-but-game smile.

Derek snorts. “Of course,” he says, tucking an arm underneath his head. “What kind of crime?”

“I’m talking to some people on the WLO victim support group to see if there’s anyone there who might be able to get some information for me,” Stiles says. “Specifically, some of the computer work that Babylon did was done by an agency in LA called One Click. I’m seeing if anyone knows
“anything about it.”

“That doesn’t sound like crime,” Derek points out.

“Oh, well, it probably will be in the end,” Stiles says, and continues typing.

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Everyone has a good time at the lacrosse game. Isaac is wearing Cora’s scarf even though it’s seventy degrees out, and it looks like she might faint when she sees him in it. She keeps giving him sideways looks and biting on her lips like she wants to say something but doesn’t know what to say. They barely exchange two sentences through the entire game or ice cream outing afterwards, but as they’re all splitting up to go home, she trots up to him and says, “Um, do you, um, do you want to come over after, after school on Tuesday? Or Wednesday? We could, uh, we could hang out . . . ?”

“Sure,” Isaac says, with a smile so bright that it’s like someone suddenly plugged in the sun.

Stiles would have said the day went perfectly, except that he noticed more bruises on Isaac. Nobody else sees them, but Stiles knows what it looks like when makeup is covering a bruise. He did more than his fair share of it during the bullying the year before. He’s not sure what to do or say about this, but he’s starting to get suspicions that he really doesn’t like.

He calls up Danny that evening and says, “Look, you’re sure that nobody is bullying Isaac, right?”

“Dude, I’m sure,” Danny says. “I’d put a stop to it if they were, you know that.”

“Maybe you’re not seeing it, maybe they’re cornering him somewhere – ”


Stiles sighs. “Okay,” he says. “Thanks,” he adds, and hangs up. If Isaac isn’t being bullied at school, he can only think of one place where the injuries might be coming from, and he likes that even less than the alternative. He makes a hesitant attempt to ask Isaac about it when he’s over that Wednesday evening, but Isaac just pretends he doesn’t know what he means and exits the conversation.

At least Wednesday goes well. It’s leftover night, and Stiles is busy with a million things. The adults have again made themselves scarce, although Laura and Jonathan are there. Isaac eats at the kitchen table with Derek, Scott, and Cora. Stiles is in and out as he can be, and he knows that Derek’s keeping an eye on the situation.

One of his friends from the WLO victim support group has found a friend of a friend who has an uncle (“former roommate?” Stiles cracked) who’s a private investigator in Los Angeles. He’s going to see if he can get some records from One Click to see who hired them to do the computer work. Another friend’s wife works for the same bank that Jack Babylon’s utility bills go to, and she might be persuaded to do a little snooping.

Stiles isn’t thrilled with the idea. He’s okay breaking the law himself, but he doesn’t like the idea of getting other people in trouble. He’s even less pleased with the idea of people doing it for him, because they idolize him like some sort of hero. He’s not a hero, he reminds them repeatedly, he’s
just a kid who stumbled into the right place at the right time –

and didn’t give up, and put himself in danger, and exposed a massive conspiracy, the people on the support group usually reply, and Stiles gives in at that point. He needs them, whether he wants to take advantage of them or not.

“Use what you’ve got,” Peter says, when questioned about this. “Always use what you’ve got. If it’s for the pack. Take whatever people will give you without hesitation or shame.”

“That’s very . . . exploitative, Uncle P, thanks,” Stiles says, and Peter just shrugs, because it doesn’t bother him. Stiles knows that he and Peter are very alike in some ways, but there are some ways that they are very unalike, and occasionally it makes Peter extremely useless for help.

While he’s waiting for more information on that front, he goes through what he’s learned about the alphas. He has every alpha in California and the contiguous states listed and ranked in order of a number of factors: distance from Santa Rosa, the scale of damage the WLO did to their pack, everything he can discover about their finances, whether or not they have any Druids or sorcerers in their packs.

The list starts with nearly a thousand people on it. California alone has almost six hundred alphas in it. It’s a huge state with a lot of rural areas. Arizona and Nevada both have about a hundred. Oregon, surprisingly, has two hundred, but after some thought Stiles decides that makes sense, because of how much empty but still livable space there is. Werewolves aren’t particularly fond of desert.

Because the list is so huge, he decides to focus on the alphas in California alone, moving all the others to a secondary list that he’ll tackle at some unspecified future time. He rates anyone that doesn’t have a direct connection to the WLO as a low priority, sorts by distance, by money, weighting all the different factors.

In the end, he’s left with a list of about a dozen strong candidates. He’s somewhat surprised to see Deucalion pop up as number three on the list, but then he supposes that makes sense. Duke has as much reason to hate the WLO as any other alpha – a good deal more, for that matter. He’s obviously got a lot of money. Stiles looks at all the ranking factors and realizes that if it weren’t for the fact that Deucalion’s territory is down in all the way down southern California, he would probably be the number one suspect.

He chews on this for a few minutes. Thinks about crossing Deucalion’s name off the list. Then decides against it. He doesn’t have any evidence that Deucalion is innocent. Just because he knows him isn’t a good enough reason to eliminate him as a suspect. Deucalion knows Talia, he’s her friend, so Stiles thinks it’s unlikely that he would frame her brother and use her pack as a testing ground for – whatever this is. He can’t fathom what Duke’s motive would be for Seth’s role in things. But just because he can’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not there.

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Isaac is starting to get used to leaving school after lacrosse practice and seeing Stiles in his Jeep. This time, Stiles is sitting on the hood of it, scribbling in a notebook. He looks up when Isaac approaches. “Dude, I hate to seem like such a creeper,” he says, “but you don’t have a cell phone, and I tried your house but got an answering machine, and I didn’t want to leave a message since
you said your dad isn’t totally cool with you having a werewolf girlfriend. So, here I am. ‘Sup?’

There’s a moment of jack-knifing emotions between terror at the thought of Stiles calling his house and bone-melting relief to hear that he hadn’t left a message. He shrugs and says, “I don’t exactly have a booming social life.”

“Well, we should really get you a cell phone or something,” Stiles says. “I’m a lot better at texting than phone conversations, anyway.”

“Yeah, that’ll happen sometime next century,” Isaac says. His father get him a cell phone? Not likely. Especially given his grades.

Stiles gives him a thoughtful look for a few moments, the kind of look that makes Isaac profoundly nervous. He’s already trying to think up more excuses, but fortunately, Stiles lets it drop. “Anyway, you wanna come over for a bit? Talia wants to meet you, now that you and Cora kind of officially have a thing, even if it’s only a ‘we’re going to take this at glacier speed’ kind of thing.”

“Uh, is there a right answer to that? Because I don’t think ‘no, because she’s got a reputation’ is the right one.” There’s a pause. “Oh, man, that was totally rude. Sorry?” He looks like he’d like the parking lot to open up and swallow him.

Stiles is laughing. “No big. I mean, Talia can be pretty scary, I won’t deny that. But she’s actually a cool person underneath it. And she’s really anxious to meet you. I mean, what happened to Cora was hard for her, too.”

“And meeting me is going to help fix it?” Isaac asks skeptically.

“Uh, yeah. Because you aren’t a complete douchebag and you obviously really like Cora.”

“So . . . just don’t be the worst?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, laughing again. “I mean, given how awful Seth was, and given her reaction when she met me, you’re golden, trust me.” He hesitates a little. “Peter might be there too. Just so you know.”

“Is Cora going to be there?” Isaac asks. He would walk into a lion’s den if Cora were there. He can put up with Peter Hale if he needs to.

“We thought it might be less stressful if she wasn’t, so you two didn’t feel, like, interrogated?” Stiles says. “But she’ll be there at dinner afterwards.”

Isaac considers this. Alone time with Talia Hale isn’t his idea of a good time, but he could handle it for dinner with Cora. “Okay.”

“Cool.” Stiles hops off the hood of the Jeep and fishes out his keys. “No time like the present, right?”

“Sure. But I have to be home by seven,” he adds. God help him if he’s not home in time to cook dinner for his father. Fortunately, he tends to start work around one in the afternoon, work six or seven hours, and then head back to the cemetery once it’s dark. He’s rarely there in the mornings.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Stiles says, and they load into the Jeep. He immediately changes the subject to some case he’s been working on lately, and Isaac sits mostly in silence. He thinks sometimes that Stiles just needs to talk things out, and doesn’t particularly require input. The drive to the Hale house seems altogether too short, and the next thing Isaac knows, Stiles is piling his
stork legs out of the car and heading up their front walk.

Isaac follows, trying not to show how nervous he is. “You know, I’d hate to be the person who mows this lawn,” he says.

“That’s Derek’s idea of fun,” Stiles tells him, with a shrug. “Lanscaping. It’s what he does. But they allow big chunks of it to just grow wild, so you know, there’s that.”

“He’d probably think that mowing the cemetery was relaxing,” Isaac grumbles.

“Most likely.” Stiles shoves the front door open and gestures for Isaac to follow him. He ducks into the kitchen, but nobody’s there, so he just grabs two cans of soda and continues further into the house. He knocks on a closed door, and Talia calls from inside for them to come in, and before Isaac has time to prepare, Stiles is Waltzing inside.

It looks like some sort of library or study. There’s a large desk to one side, where Talia is sitting, and a number of plush chairs. Two entire walls are covered with books. A lot of them look like sets of reference or law books, with identical spines. Several large windows are letting in plenty of light. Talia looks up as they come in. She’s dressed in a women’s business suit, and her hair is swept up into a bun, but she looks more tired than stern.

Stiles crosses the room and leans over to press his cheek against hers in greeting, and then he says, “Talia, this is Isaac Lahey.” There’s a note of unusual formality in his voice. “Isaac, this is Talia, our alpha.”

Isaac pulls himself up out of his slouch and says, politely, “It’s nice to meet you, ma’am,” even though he’s not at all sure it’s true yet.

“Please call me Talia,” she says, taking his hand in both of hers. “It’s so nice to finally meet you, Isaac. Stiles has told me a lot about you.”

Isaac blinks at her for a startled moment. “All good, I hope,” he says. He intends for it to come out joking, but it doesn’t exactly happen that way.

“Inasmuch as anything associated with this entire clusterfuck can be considered good,” Talia says. That startles a laugh out of Isaac. “I got to meet Cora,” he says, which he clearly thinks is a good thing.

“This is true.” Talia lets out a breath. “Thank you. For being so patient with her. I know that it probably isn’t easy for you.”

“It, uh, it isn’t that hard either,” Isaac offers, and shrugs a little. “I mean, what would be the point in trying to hug her or something if it only made her want to run away.”

For a moment it looks like Talia might actually cry from relief. “You . . . have no idea how happy I am to hear you say that.”

Isaac blinks at her for a few minutes. “Yeah, I uh, I heard the bar was set pretty low by the last guy.”

Stiles gives a snort of laughter before he flops into a chair. “You could put it that way,” he says. “And I told everyone that you seemed like a good guy, and really, that was all they needed to hear. But Talia still wanted to meet you, because well, she’s the alpha. And because Cora is her daughter.”
Talia nods and says, “please sit down, Isaac. You don’t have to be afraid of me, I promise. I don’t bite. Well,” she adds, with a slight smile, “I do sometimes, but only after the paperwork is signed.”

Isaac laughs again and then sits. “What a lawyer comment.”

“Well, I am what I am,” Talia says. “If I say ‘tell me about yourself, will you give me another one of those deer-in-headlight looks?”

“Maybe?” He does look nervous. “I, uh, I’m not terrible at lacrosse. Human lacrosse. Obviously.” He rubs a hand over the back of his head, embarrassed. “I’m an okay cook, I like comic books, have kind of crappy grades, and know how to operate a backhoe.” He looks up at her, hoping that this batch of eclectic facts is adequate.

“And... Stiles says that you were wearing an orange bracelet. Were there questions you had, about joining a pack?”

“I read everything and I went to the seminar,” Isaac tells her. “I mean, I’m sure I’ll have questions at some point. But I . . . I wasn’t exactly intending to go? But it’s sort of a thing. At school. I mean, I’m glad I met Cora. But . . .’ He trails off and then shrugs. “I’m not allowed to date so I wasn’t going to go. An orange bracelet seemed like a good compromise.”

Talia frowns slightly. “What exactly do your parents think about all this?”

“I’m not exactly sure what my dad thinks,” Isaac says. “I haven’t told him much besides the fact that I’m spending time with friends. Which is true, since Cora just wants to be friends for now.”

“How convenient for you,” Talia says dryly. “Well, teenagers will be teenagers, I suppose. But if it would help if I spoke with him, I would certainly be willing.”

“No,” Isaac says hastily. “He’s not real social.”

Talia is still frowning slightly. “Well, I’ll take your word on it, at least for now. I suppose since you and Cora are taking things slowly, there’s no reason to worry about it for now.”

Isaac carefully makes sure he doesn’t melt with relief, although he really wants to. Stiles clearly sees how nervous he is, because he says, “Well, I’m gonna go start dinner. Wanna help out, Isaac? I can show you how to make Cora’s favorite cookies.”

“Yeah,” Isaac says, more enthusiastic. “Absolutely.”

Stiles smiles over at Talia and says, “We’re going to eat a little early today, if you don’t mind. Isaac needs to be home by seven.”

“Mm hm,” Talia says, somewhat thoughtfully. “That’s fine, Stiles. Thank you for letting me know.”

Isaac is more than happy to be done with intimidating adults for the moment, and follows Stiles out. The other teenager is already chattering. “See, the thing about werewolves is that they’re all super tasters,” he says, oblivious to whether or not Isaac actually cares. “That doesn’t mean that they hate strong foods, it’s just that they can be very particular. Like, what they like, they really like, and what they don’t like, they hate with a fire of a thousand suns. So, Derek is like, addicted to stuff with ginger in it. Ginger cookies, ginger tea, Chinese food with ginger in it. I’m surprised he doesn’t actually pop out a tail that starts wagging when he smells me using ginger.”

“So, what does Cora like?” Isaac asks.
Stiles, who had expected him to ask this, grins at him, but then blinks. “Uh, she likes, uh, shit, she likes . . . those . . . yellow sour things.”

Having seen Stiles do this before, Isaac tries suggestions. “Skittles?” No, that was stupid, Skittles come in a ton of colors. “Wait. Lemons?”

“Yes! Lemons,” Stiles says. “She loves lemons. I have this lemon bar recipe I make her. Technically, it’s the denmaker’s job to make all the food, but it’s also kind of a thing to offer food to your mate? It’s like, a sign of intimacy,” he adds, wiggling his eyebrows in what he obviously intends to be a salacious manner.

“You’re ridiculous,” Isaac informs him.

“What’s that? You don’t want me to make some lemon bars for you to give to Cora?”

Isaac gives him a mock dirty look.

“Okay then,” Stiles says, rolls up his sleeves, and gets to work. It’s a simple recipe, something that Isaac thinks he could probably tackle at home some time. They’ve been in the oven about ten minutes, and Isaac is helping Stiles chop vegetables for dinner, when Cora peeks in from the living room. She’s obviously smelled what’s in the oven. The metaphor about a wagging tail makes a lot more sense to Isaac all of a sudden.

Isaac smiles at her, clearly pleased to see her, but then turns back to the chopping. He’s learned that it’s better to let her decide when or if she’s going to talk to him. After several long minutes, she edges into the kitchen. “Those smell good,” she says, directing this to Isaac even though it really should go to Stiles.

“Stiles was teaching me the recipe,” Isaac tells her, thinking that he might actually enjoy cooking for Cora as opposed to it being a chore like when he does it for his father.

Cora’s gaze darts to Stiles. “Oh,” she says. “That, um, that’s . . . nice. Are you staying for dinner?”

“I . . . yes?” Isaac says, hoping that’s the right answer.

Cora hesitates, then says, “Will you . . . sit by me tonight?”

“If you want me to,” Isaac says, still uncertain, and Cora nods shyly, tucking her hair behind her ear.

~ ~ ~ ~
“Here’s what I don’t get,” Stiles says, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Let’s say I’m a lone madman who kills babies in his spare time. And I go into Northwestern Memorial hospital in Chicago and murder a bunch of werewolf babies. It’s a rousing success. I’m never caught, there are never even any strong leads. So why do I stop? Why are these babies the only ones I ever kill?”

Tom nods wearily. “It’s a puzzle, no mistake about that. No terrorist group ever claimed responsibility, and nothing like this ever happened again.”

“And why poison?” Stiles continues to muse. “Why something slow? I mean, killing someone in a hospital is a stupid enough idea anyway. There are trained professionals waiting five feet away to try to save them. So if you’re going to kill someone in a hospital, especially helpless infants, why something slow and uncertain like poison? Why not something definitive?”

“Maybe so he wouldn’t get caught,” Tom suggests, barely glancing up from his files. “I mean, sure, he could have walked in with a pistol. But that makes noise, draws attention, and leaves ballistic evidence.”

“Okay, sure, a gun would’ve been a bad idea,” Stiles agrees, “but why poison? Why not knives? Why didn’t he smother them? Why something that might not have killed them all?”

Now Tom suddenly looks up. “Wait,” he says, “maybe you’re onto something. What are the odds that all these babies were werewolves?”

“Oh, geez, uh,” Stiles says, scrabbling around for different files. “Fuck. You know I can’t do math.”

“Swear jar,” his father says, and Stiles lifts his hands in surrender, “but okay, you’re right. Give me the data. Eleven babies, right? What’s the parentage?”

It takes Stiles a minute to compile all the data. “Three couples were both born wolves. Four were one born, one turned. Two were two turned wolves. One was one born wolf and one human, and one was one turned wolf and one human.”

“Okay, so I’d have to do a lot of math to figure out the odds here,” Tom says, “but it’s at least possible that all these babies were werewolves. Right?”

Stiles nods. “The couple with the lowest odds would’ve been the human and the turned wolf, and even they would’ve had a twenty percent chance of a wolf baby. I think it’d be unusual for all the babies to have been werewolves, but by no means impossible.”

“So what if whoever did this was trying to avoid killing any human babies? Rather than walking in and smothering every baby with a single wolf parent, what if they administered some kind of poison that would have killed the werewolf babies but left the human babies undamaged? And we just didn’t realize it, because it just never occurred to us that maybe all the babies were werewolves.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Stiles says, growing enthusiastic. “They never did identify the kind of poison that was used. There was just liver and tissue damage that suggested poisoning. I mean, the babies developed a high fever and basically went into multiple organ failure and that was it. They were
able to rule out every type of illness or bacteria or whatever, especially since there were so many unaffected babies right there in the same hospital, but they were never able to nail down the exact cause.”

Tom taps his fingers against the table. “This doesn’t exactly help us figure out what Leo Stewart might have stumbled onto.”

“No, and it doesn’t really help us figure out why this was just a one-off, either,” Stiles says. “Because I’m still confused by that. Why do this once and then just stop? One of the detectives who took the case actually posed the theory that it was targeted at a specific family, and they just killed everyone else to cover their tracks. But they dug into the lives of every parent involved, and even every alpha of said parents. They couldn’t find anyone who had the sort of enemy who would’ve been willing to kill eleven infants just to make a statement.”

“Well, but what if they missed somebody?” Tom counters. “What if Leo Stewart was that parent, and he realized that he was the target?”

Stiles chews on his lower lip. “Maybe we should talk to his wife.”

“I don’t think it would be particularly helpful,” Tom says, shaking his head. “We have all her initial statements from the investigation. And it’s pretty clear that Leo left her out of this because he didn’t want her in danger. I doubt she would know anything.”

“Well, who has his stuff?” Stiles asks. “I mean, you can’t just conduct an investigation and remember everything. Even people without brain damage can’t do that. He must have had files. What happened to them when he went missing?” He rubs both hands over his face. “Was that – did I say that before? I have déjà vu.”

“You did,” Tom says, nodding, “last time we talked about this. It was one of the things I was looking into. The police took possession of anything that was related to his PI business, on the theory that it might help them figure out why he went missing. But I talked to a friend there and he said there was nothing whatsoever that might relate back to the case of the murdered kids.”

“So he kept it somewhere else,” Stiles surmises.

“Yeah. My guess is a storage unit. In which case we might never find it. If it had been under his own name, the police would have gotten it, and since they didn’t . . . if he paid far enough in advance it might still be there. But the odds are, it’s been auctioned off by now.”

“If you found a storage unit full of papers about dead babies . . .”

“The average joe would look at them and say, ‘private papers, boring, worthless’, and chuck them in the trash.” Tom shakes his head. “But . . . the wife might know if he had a storage unit or where he might have kept that sort of thing. Maybe I’ll make a few calls. See if I can dig anything up.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, brightening up slightly. “And we should dig into his life. And his pack. I mean, maybe you’re right, maybe he was the target all along. God knows I’ve been doing research on enough alphas lately, what’s adding one more?”

Tom arches his eyebrows. “Exactly what alphas are you researching, and why?”

Stiles’ eyes went wide as he realized he was caught. “Oh, uh, it’s, um. For school?”

Tom gives him an unimpressed look.
Stiles winces. “Okay, I’ve *maybe* been looking into Gerard’s murder. A little. After you told me not to.”

“Color me completely shocked,” Tom says, and then groans. “Okay, okay. Look, kid. You’re clearly going to keep investigating Gerard’s murder no matter what I do to try to stop you. And it’s pretty obvious that you’re coming at it from a different angle than I am. So, we might as well pool our information and make sure we have a complete picture.”

Stiles gives him a sideways look. “This isn’t a trap, right?”

“No trap.” Tom lifts his hands in surrender. “I want to solve this, you know. So as long as you keep your grades up, I don’t have a compelling reason for you *not* to look into it. As long as you’re not breaking the law.”

“Yes!” Stiles bounds up the stairs. Tom shakes his head and takes a few moments to gather his own files. They sort through everything and get it in order. Tom has a very specific timeline of the crime, which Stiles didn’t have. Peter had found the body at about nine PM, and called 911. The ambulance had arrived eight minutes later, and the medical examiner had determined that Gerard had been dead for about an hour at that point. It was impossible to say exactly when the killer had struck, since a bite rejection could take anywhere between one and four hours to kill someone, depending on their immune system and overall health.

“Of course, that only nails down the time that the *alpha* would have to be there,” Tom says. “The person who poisoned him with mountain ash could have come any time in the preceding weeks.”

“Do we have any idea how much mountain ash he had ingested?” Stiles asks, tapping at his desk with his pencil.

“It’s not exactly something that a lot of research has been done on,” Tom says, shaking his head. “The ME’s best guess was that he had been taking it for less than a week, but that was based less on ‘how much mountain ash was in his system’ and more on ‘how long could he have gone without the medication they swapped it out with without noticing’.”

Stiles nods and pushes his hands through his hair. “Do we know when it was last refilled?” he asks.

Tom flips through a folder and finds a picture of the bottle. “Five days before his death.”

“So they might not have even needed access to his house,” Stiles says. “They might have been able to swap it out at the pharmacy. Have the employees been screened for ties to, well, anything?”

“I’m not sure, actually,” Tom says, and looks through another file. Then he says, “Nope. The cops down in Santa Rosa were so sure it was Peter that, well. Let’s just say they weren’t thorough.”

Stiles chews on his pencil. “I’m gonna assume you’ve looked into that.”

“I don’t take accusations of corruption lightly, kiddo,” Tom says. “You bet your buns I’ve looked into it. But if they’ve been bribed, they were careful about it. There’s no evidence of it. Which doesn’t mean much. Cops know how to accept bribes without evidence. Cashier’s checks, numbered accounts. They won’t spend it until it’s all over.”

“Yeah.” Stiles considers to think about this. “So there’s three real questions. One: how did they access the drugs. Two: how did they know Gerard was going to get the bite. And three: who gave him the bite, and were they complicit.”
Tom nods approval. “Gerard was still in touch with a number of his WLO cronies, and Peter’s given me a list. Any or all of them could have known that he was going to try the bite to cure his cancer, and I can definitely see that they might have complained about it, bitterly and with volume. But none of them are willing to talk to us, and we don’t have anywhere near enough evidence to make them. Other than that, the only person who might have known was the alpha themselves.”

“Yeah. Which to me is the most likely explanation. It’s, uh . . .” Stiles purses his lips. “That principle that the simplest explanation is the most likely.”

“Occam’s Razor,” his father supplies.

“Right,” Stiles says, gesturing with the pencil. “I still think the alpha and the poisoner are the same person.”

“Well, let’s see your list, then,” Tom says.

Stiles nods and takes out his laptop. “I have them sorted by order of most to least likely,” he said, as his father put on his reading glasses and leaned over his shoulder.

Tom skims the first few names, then frowns slightly and sits back. “I see you’ve got your friend Deucalion on here.”

Stiles squirms. “I can’t . . . ignore him, just because I like him,” he says. “I mean, I included every alpha in California and all the contiguous states on here, and then I sorted them by a variety of different factors, and I can’t . . . I can’t ignore the fact that he fits most of the criteria for a likely suspect, not just for Gerard’s murder but for what’s happening with Seth.” He lifts a hand and starts to count off on his fingers. “He’s an alpha. He’s got tons of money. He’s got connections with Druids, hell, he’s married to one. And he’s got motive out the wazoo, I mean, the WLO killed his mate. He lost his eyesight, his entire pack, he had to fight just to keep his territory.

“And I mean, that’s not exactly a bizarre set of circumstances. Half the alphas on this list meet that criteria. Packs tend to have money. They tend to be allied with their local Druids. Hell, we are, Talia’s been friends with Dr. Deaton since they were both in diapers. Talia meets all the same criteria, she just happens to have a rock solid alibi.” Stiles looks up at his father somewhat anxiously. “Do you think it’s bad? That I’ve got him on the list?”

“No.” Tom reaches over and squeezes his shoulder. “Part of being a cop is the ability to be impartial and consider every suspect, even if they’re someone you know personally.”

Stiles lets out a breath that sounds like a sigh of relief. “See, the thing is, though, I can’t shake this feeling that Gerard’s death wasn’t actually about Gerard. That it was about Peter, and Seth, and the Searching Ceremonies. And if Duke – if any alpha – has motive there, I sure as fuck don’t see it. I can’t figure out why a werewolf would want to sabotage the ceremonies like that.”

“I’ve got to admit, I don’t see it either,” Tom says. “But I think it would be possible to do some discrete investigation into a few of the alphas that you have listed as the most likely suspects. If nothing else, I should be able to get a warrant for their phones and financials, which would help us establish who has alibis and who doesn’t. Should help us rule some people out.”

“Thanks,” Stiles says.

Tom tousles his hair. “You don’t have to thank me, you know. I want to clear Peter’s name as much as you do. And God knows that I really want to nail those cops down in Santa Rosa if I can. We’ll work it out, okay? Let me do some research. Go be a teenager.” He gathers up his files.
“How are things going with Cora and Isaac?”

“Good,” Stiles says. “Really good, actually. I mean, obviously they’re taking it pretty slowly, but I think . . . it’s good that Isaac’s willing to take it slowly, y’know? He really cares about Cora.” He fidgets for a minute. “Hey, uh, can I ask a question but you have to promise, promise, promise you won’t say anything to anyone, or start investigating and stuff?”

“That’s a hell of a request, coming from you,” Tom says dryly, “given all the times you’ve poked your nose into things after I’ve asked you not to. But okay.” He lifts a hand and says, “I so solemnly swear. What’s bothering you?”

“What, um, what do you do if you think . . . someone is hurting someone else? But they won’t admit it? I mean, the person being hurt won’t admit it.”

Tom frowns and leans against the wall, folding his arms over his chest. “I know you were worried about Isaac being bullied. Is that what this is about?”

“Sort of,” Stiles says. “I mean, I know you talked to the teachers, and Danny’s looking out for him, and I actually really trust Danny to keep an eye out for me. Because he still feels really bad about all the times he didn’t step in when it was happening to me. I know that Isaac isn’t being bullied at school. Not physically, at least.”

“But . . . ?” his father prompts.

“But he has bruises sometimes,” Stiles says, “and he always tries to hide them. He doesn’t want anyone to see. And uh . . . he still won’t tell his father that he’s coming over to the Hale house. He’s always really tense about making sure he gets home before his dad in the evenings, and . . .” Stiles fidgets. “I’m just really worried about him. But every time I try to ask him about it, he just says he’s fine and shuts me down.”

“Mm hm.” Tom’s quiet for a long minute and then says, “Well, to answer your question. What you do in a situation like that is tell an adult that you trust, who can then look into the situation.”

“You promised!” Stiles protests.

“Yes, I did,” Tom says, “but son, I believe you’re smart enough to know that I wouldn’t keep my word. Isaac doesn’t have to know that you said anything. There are a lot of observant people in the Hale pack.” He sees the look on Stiles’ face and sighs. “Look, kiddo. I know that situations like this are tricky. Being an adult can be a lot like a giant game of ‘would you rather’. So. Would you rather risk Isaac being angry at you for poking your nose where he thinks it doesn’t belong – and I’d like to point out that this is one time where I think it’s somewhere your nose absolutely does belong – or would you rather he continue to get hurt?”

Stiles sighs. “I guess I was just hoping for a third option.”

“There isn’t always one of those handy,” Tom says. “But like I said, I won’t tell Isaac that you said something.”

“But what if his dad hurts him more because he thinks he told someone?” Stiles asks anxiously.

“Then he’ll go to jail, Stiles, and Isaac will be away from him for good,” Tom says. “Let me handle this. Okay?”

Stiles rubs both hands over his face. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, okay. Just . . . be careful, okay? I think . . . Isaac’s been hurt a lot in his life. I just want him to be okay.”
“I know.” Tom squeezes his shoulder. “But I think he will be, Stiles. We’ll get it worked out.”

As long as Isaac is home in time to make dinner and his grades stay up, his father frankly couldn’t care less where he is in the afternoon. That starts to come in handy as Isaac gravitates more and more towards the Hale house after school. The lacrosse season is in full swing, but if he skips practice now and then, nobody notices or cares. It’s not like he’s ever on the field.

Spending time with the Hales in the afternoon is fascinating, frustrating, amazing in ways he never would have thought to describe. Stiles, Scott, Allison, and Cora sit and do their homework after school, so Isaac joins them. His grades are coming up just from that alone. Cora’s quiet, but getting less so as she adjusts to his presence. Scott and Allison are made of sunshine. Stiles alternates between careful monitoring of the Cora-Isaac situation, wide grins and sarcastic remarks, and occasional afternoons of frustration as he struggles with his work.

Laura is in and out, and sometimes Peter is there, too. Isaac isn’t quite sure what to make of Peter, but isn’t bothered by him. After years with his father, it’s hard to find anyone else scary. The only thing that scares him about Peter is that he might convince Cora not to like him.

When Stiles realizes that the reason Isaac always needs to be home by six is so he has time to cook dinner before his father gets home, he starts giving Isaac Tupperwares full of the previous day’s leftovers so he can leave half an hour later without it being a problem. That gives him four full hours there, which is nice; it gives them time to watch a movie or play a game, depending on how much homework they have.

About two weeks after his first evening at the Hale house, it’s a beautiful, windy day, and Cora asks hesitantly, “Would you . . . like to go kite-flying? The weather’s perfect for it.”

“I haven’t flown a kite since my brother went to Iraq,” Isaac says, without thinking, and when Cora’s face falls, he hastily adds, “That doesn’t mean I don’t want to. I was just saying. I think it would be fun.”

Cora’s face lights up and they walk out to a clearing on the Hale property. Scott and Allison go along with them; Stiles stays behind so he can keep working on dinner. Isaac has noticed that Cora, as much as she’s starting to seek his company, never wants to be alone with him. Since he knows that Seth used ‘alone time’ as an opportunity to drug and brainwash her, this seems perfectly reasonable to him. He thinks that she’ll probably get past it, if he gives her time. And for him, any time with Cora is good. They don’t need to be alone.

So they fly kites and then play some Frisbee and he realizes that time has gotten away from him and he has to run back to the house. Stiles presses two containers of spaghetti and meatballs into his hands, and Scott drives him home.

One of these days, he knows, his luck is going to run out. His father will come home early, or wonder why the food has suddenly gotten so much better, or somehow figure out that Isaac isn’t coming straight home. It’s not that Isaac isn’t afraid of that day – he’s downright petrified, to be honest – but Cora and the Hale house are like a magnet, drawing him back even when he knows it would be safer to stay away. Adages about moths and flames spring to mind. Only he thinks that’s not really accurate. It’s not the Hales that are going to hurt him.
Fridays are his favorite day because they never bother with homework, and Stiles doesn’t cook although he sometimes bakes, and Derek often gets off work early so he can come hang out with them. Isaac likes watching Stiles and Derek together, because he knows that they had their issues at the beginning, but now they’re literally the happiest couple he’s ever met. He daydreams about the day that Cora will be that comfortable around him.

They settle in to watch a movie. Twenty minutes later, the oven buzzer goes off and Stiles leaps off the sofa to trot into the kitchen. A few minutes later there’s a crash and a ‘whoops’, and Derek says “oh geez” and gets up to go help out. Isaac finds that he’s suddenly sitting alone on the couch with Cora. They had started at opposite ends, but now there’s nobody in between them.

Cora doesn’t seem to notice, but she does shift and readjust her position, scooting a little closer to him. Isaac holds as still as a statue and keeps his gaze trained on the television. Cora makes a slightly disgruntled noise and then shifts again, moving towards him an inch at a time. Isaac risks a nervous glance at her, but she isn’t looking at him; her attention is wholly absorbed by the movie and he doesn’t think she really even realizes what she’s doing.

After a few minutes, she’s close enough to him that she leans over and absently rubs her cheek against his upper arm. He doesn’t even breathe. Then she abruptly flops over so she’s in his lap. All without ever looking away from the television. Nervously, Isaac lifts a hand and runs his fingers through her hair. She makes a noise that’s almost like a happy little purr, and curls up more comfortably.

At some point, Isaac sees Derek start to come back in the room, see them on the sofa together, and do an abrupt one-eighty. So they’re left alone. His legs fall asleep and he doesn’t even care. He’s not about to leave the sofa or make Cora move for hell or high water.

It’s not until Tyler wakes up from his nap and comes barreling downstairs that things change. He sees them on the sofa and throws himself onto it with them. “Auntie Cora!” he says, crawling onto her. She laughs, grabbing him and tickling him. He blinks up at Isaac, who he’s met before several times, and says, “You’re Unca Isaac now, right?”

Isaac flushes pink. “I, uh . . . I guess so, sure.”

Cora’s blushing as well, as she sits up and darts a look at Isaac. “Um. Thanks. I mean. It was nice. Sitting with you.”

“Yeah,” Isaac agrees, both of them sitting there, blushing like idiots.

“Oh hey!” Stiles breaks up the moment, seeing that it’s about to devolve into awkwardness. Isaac is glad for the distraction. “I almost forgot. This is for you.” He tosses a small, rectangular object towards Isaac. The teenager reflexively lifts one hand to catch it, and checks it out. It’s a phone, not a crappy little flip phone but an actual smart phone. “I know you don’t have a phone but it’ll just be so much easier for all of us if we can text and stuff, so, happy early birthday or something.”

“Oh, I, uh,” Isaac stammers. “You can’t – ”

“Just did!” Stiles responds, and darts back into the kitchen before Isaac can try not to accept the gift.

Cora clears her throat and says, “Can I . . . ?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Isaac says, letting her take the phone. Her hands are trembling just a bit as she programs her number in, then hands it back to him. “I should, um, I should put it in your phone too,
right?” he asks, and she nods and they exchange phones again. Isaac has to look up the number on his new phone so he can put it into Cora’s.

No sooner has he done that then it chimes to say he’s received a text. He fumbles around and pulls it up. It’s from Stiles, and it reads, ‘unlimited texting, it’s on the family plan with the rest of us, go nuts!’

“I should, um,” Isaac says to Cora, seeing on the phone that it’s about five minutes to six. “I should get home.”

“Can’t . . . can’t you stay?” Cora asks. “Just a little longer?”


“What if my mom talked to him? I can’t . . . Isaac, you can’t . . . keep this a secret from him forever. I know he’ll be angry, I do, and I don’t want you to get in trouble, but I can’t . . . it’s getting hard to let you walk away every night.” She’s starting to blurt out things that she looks like she might regret later. “I want you here, like, all the time, I don’t want you to go. Please can’t you stay just this once?”

Isaac thinks that if there are people in the world who can say no to that, he sure as hell isn’t one of them. It’s disturbing to realize that he would gladly spend a night in the freezer if it means that Cora will stop looking so lost and hurt. “Okay,” he says. “I mean. Just for tonight, I guess. Until you fall asleep. Then I’ll have to go.”

Cora nods and says, “Thank you,” and she leans up and brushes a kiss across his jaw and Isaac mentally revises his opinion: he would spend weeks in the freezer for another kiss from Cora, if that’s what it took. He uses his phone and calls home, leaves a message on the machine telling his father he’s out with friends and might not be back until after dinner. He’ll still get his ass kicked, but less so than if he just didn’t come home.

That’s his first full pack dinner. Everyone is there, and it’s loud and cheerful. Aaron brought home take-out from a barbecue place, and everyone is stuffing their faces. No one pays too much attention to him, except Cora, who’s got a death grip on his forearm like she’s afraid someone might take him away. There’s four conversations going on at once, and he’s able to melt into the background and observe like every other social situation he’s ever engaged in. Of course, that doesn’t stop the pack from going out of their way to engage with him. Tyler seems to have taken an interest in getting to know his new uncle, and keeps pelting Isaac with questions. That, more than anything else, seems to loosen up the adults at the table. Isaac has heard about how much the toddler hated Seth, so he’s strangely flattered to be the recipient of his curiosity.

“You’ve got, um, a bit of sauce on your face,” Cora says, reaching up brush her thumb over his cheek. Isaac knows he’s turning pink, but he doesn’t even mind.

There’s cupcakes for dessert. Apparently that was what Stiles was doing to keep himself busy in the kitchen so he wouldn’t disturb Isaac and Cora’s cuddle fest on the sofa. Isaac eats cupcakes and drinks iced tea and he feels good, and he doesn’t want to go home. He knows that the longer he puts it off, the worse the punishment will be, but he doesn’t care. He’ll have all weekend to recover from whatever it is.

“Can we, um . . . can we go up to my room for a little while?” Cora asks her mother, as Isaac is helping Laura gather the containers of leftovers. “Is that okay?”

Talia glances at her and says, “That’s fine, Cora. Leave your door open, okay?”
Cora nods, and some of the tension goes out of her shoulders. She reaches out and takes Isaac’s hand in hers, then tugs him up the stairs.

It’s his first time in her room, and she doesn’t seem to notice how messy it is, with clothes tossed into various corners, posters from anime and movies tacked up on the lavender walls, bed unmade, various bits of makeup and hair supplies strewn across her desk. “So . . .” Isaac says, feeling incredibly nervous. He’s never been in a girl’s room before, and has no idea how he’s supposed to behave.

“We need to talk,” Cora blurts out, and Isaac resists the urge to run away. “I’m really sorry about earlier. I shouldn’t have put you in that position. Are you mad?”

“Mad?” Isaac asks, feeling lost. “Because you asked me to stay?”

Cora nods miserably. “I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“No, no, I’ll be fine,” Isaac says hastily.

Cora starts pacing around the room. “Look, um . . . I really like you. You know that, right?” she asks, and Isaac nods shyly. “And I feel like we’ve kind of avoided talking about some stuff because I’ve been really messed up, and . . . maybe we should stop putting it off. You, um, I’m pretty sure you’re my mate. I mean.” She looks up at him, anxiety written all over her face. “I can’t – I don’t trust myself after what happened with Seth. But I’ve watched the way the others behave around you and they – they seem to be pretty sure, and I want them to be right. I want you to be my mate. Is that – what you want?”

Isaac swallows. He’s not sure what the right answer is. He wants Cora to know how he feels about her, but he’s worried about scaring her. But then he’s afraid if he’s not enthusiastic, she’ll take it as a rejection. “Yeah,” he says. “I – I really do. If, I mean, if that’s what you want.”

“I’m still really . . .” Cora bites on her lower lip, not looking at him. “Scared,” she finally says. “So just . . . I’m sorry if I act weird sometimes.”

“I probably act weird sometimes, too,” Isaac offers, and Cora laughs a little. “What . . . what do you want? I mean, we can take this as slow as you want.”

“I just want to, like, touch you a lot,” she says in a rush. “Not sexy touching, just . . . regular touching.”

Isaac rubs a hand over the back of his head. “We’ve known each other less than six weeks, I’m pretty sure ‘sexy touching’ would be a bad idea even if you hadn’t gotten kinda messed up by that other guy.”

“Well, um, with mates sometimes things can go pretty quick,” Cora says, “but you’re probably right. Anyway, it’s like . . . we don’t always have to do stuff together, I just . . . I like it when you’re here. Derek says that was one of the things he found that he enjoyed most once he and Stiles actually got themselves sorted out. That they could be together without it being a big deal, that he could hang out and read while Stiles did his homework, or play on his phone while Stiles was baking, and . . . that sort of thing.”

“Well . . . what do you normally do on a Friday night?” Isaac asks.

“Usually just watch TV or text with my friends and stuff,” Cora says. “You?”

Isaac winces but knows he should have expected the question. “Um, work, a lot of the time. I
mean, Saturday and Sunday are both big days for burials, so I usually wind up out at the cemetery helping my dad out.”

“Oh. Do you – need to go?”

“No, I’d rather stay. But why don’t we just watch some TV and I won’t take it the wrong way if you text with your friends, and I’ll see what I can do with my new phone? It looks like Stiles kinda loaded it up with cool apps and I might as well see what Candy Crush is all about.”

Cora giggles. “Okay. That sounds good.”

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Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Please note: this chapter is not at all how child abuse is handled in the real world. I try to be as realistic as possible, but let's just say that child abuse laws are different when werewolves are involved, since they have the charming tendency to try to rip child abusers into pieces. =D

This chapter is mildly NSFW. Nothing graphic.

Tom gives a brief knock to the door of Talia’s study before poking his head inside. She glances up from where she’s sitting with her feet up on her desk and gestures him in. He smiles a little at the blatantly unladylike behavior but comes in, closing the door behind him. She sees him do so and sighs. “That bad?”

“Just something I want to keep private for now,” Tom says. He gestures towards the rest of the house and says, “That seems to be going well.”

“Yes, thank God,” Talia says. “I mean, I figured, if Isaac really was meant to be her mate, he would understand, but he’s been so good about letting her have her space and not pushing her too hard. I mean, I think he has his own reasons to want to take things slowly, but he’s really helped her a lot.”

Tom nods and sits down in one of the other chairs. “Well, it’s Isaac that I wanted to talk to you about. Stiles expressed a concern to me a little while back that he might be getting bullied at school. Well, I’ve checked into it, and he’s not. Which raises the question of where those bruises Stiles saw came from.”

Talia’s jaw tightens. “Admittedly, I’ve had a suspicion or two myself,” she says, “especially since he’s always in such a rush to get home before his father realizes he’s gone. I thought – I couldn’t really ask him about it. He finds me very intimidating, and I know he won’t confide in me. I was sort of hoping that he would talk to Stiles or Derek or even Cora about it, but so far he hasn’t.”

“I’ve worked with a fair number of abused kids over the years,” Tom says, shaking his head. “It’s always amazed me how reluctant they are to speak out against their abusers. The psychology of it is kind of fascinating, if we’re going to be honest. These kids love their parents. They don’t want to see them get in trouble or get hurt.”

“Which is all the more reason that we need to do something,” Talia says. She sighs and rakes a hand through her hair. “Most of my pack are smart enough and . . . stable enough . . . that they know they can’t do anything to Isaac’s father. But Cora . . . if she realizes the man is physically abusing Isaac, she might not be able to stop herself. Not after everything that’s happened.”

“I was more worried about Peter,” Tom says.

“Well. Peter.” Talia’s voice is somewhat sour. “At least we know he wouldn’t leave evidence.”
Tom laughs despite himself. “Okay. Well, I thought maybe you and I could go have a little chat with him. As far as I can tell, he doesn’t even know that his son is involved with a werewolf, and I think it’s high time he found out about that.”

“All right.” Talia pulls up the calendar on her phone. “I imagine he’d be difficult to catch on a weekend, and I’d prefer to do it while Isaac is at school, in any case. I can make some time on Tuesday around lunch.”

“Sounds good to me,” Tom says. “Anything else I should know about?”

“Unless you want to hear about Peter’s efforts to remove the GPS chip from his anklet, no. Anything on your end?”

“I got warrants for what Stiles and I narrowed down to the eight most likely alphas,” Tom says. “I’m working through their phone and financial records now. I’ve already ruled two of them out. It’s slow going, but we’ll work it out. I don’t even want to know what kind of illegal voodoo Stiles is working on.”

Talia shakes her head fondly. “Probably better not asked,” she agrees with a nod. Then she glances down at her watch. “Oh, it’s nine already. I’m going to go evict my daughter from the sofa and watch Masterpiece Theater. Care to join me?”

“I’d fall asleep five minutes in,” Tom says. “I think I’ll head home for the night. See you Sunday for brunch?”

Talia nods. “I’ll see you then.”

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Derek watches Stiles type surreptitiously while he waters and mists the plants on the shelves in his room. He thinks for a long minute about what he wants to say and how he wants to say it. When he’s finished with the plants, he walks over and gently puts a hand on Stiles’, on the keyboard of his laptop. “You want to go out somewhere?” he asks.

It’s such an innocuous question that he’s really hoping it won’t cause any strife. But Stiles looks up at him and seems to immediately grasp the undertones. “Shit, I’m the worst boyfriend in the world, aren’t I,” he says, with a wince.

“Thinking about your competition in that category in this past six months alone?” Derek asks dryly. “Not even close. But it would be nice to do something other than watch you type and feverishly mutter to yourself for three hours before you fall into bed with me.”

“Well, at least the last part is fun?” Stiles asks, trying for a smile.

Derek rubs his shoulders. “I know that you’ve got a lot on your plate right now. I just – ”

“Nope, you are one hundred percent correct, no apologies and no take-backs,” Stiles says, slapping the laptop shut. “Let’s go out. I’ll even try to keep my talking about the mysteries to a minimum, although unfortunately I can’t make any promises, given the way I can go off on tangents.”

“Okay.” Derek smiles and kisses him on the temple, then pulls him to his feet.
They decide to go to Jungle. That will certainly keep any discussion about mysteries to a minimum. The bouncer knows Stiles’ ID is fake, but he lets him in anyway. He knows that he won’t get into any trouble as long as Derek is there with him. They both get a soda and then head out onto the dance floor.

Stiles is a terrible dancer, but this never stops him, and Derek really loves watching him gyrate and groove and generally behave like an idiot in his search for rhythm. He also loves the way Stiles does it all right up against him. They alternate between the dance floor, downing sodas at the bar, and frantic groping in a dark corner. It’s about eleven when they leave, and there’s no way that they’re going to get home. They wind up in one of Stiles’ favorite parking spots, making out.

“This – this was such a good idea,” Stiles says, grinding against Derek’s lap and twisting his fingers into the werewolf’s hair. “You have the best ideas.”

“Yes, I do,” Derek says, nuzzling at his neck.

“I – oh fuck,” Stiles says, shuddering against him and then going still.

Derek licks at his ear and rubs a hand down his spine. “You okay?”

“Yes. Sorry.” Stiles laughs a little. “That was a bit anticlimactic, huh? I guess I’ve been kinda stressed lately.”

“You don’t say.” Derek shifts Stiles off his lap, back into his own seat, then makes a startled noise as Stiles just dives right over and starts mouthing at the bulge in his pants. It takes a moment of fumbling to get the button undone and the zipper down, after which Derek doesn’t last a lot longer than Stiles did. “We should do this more often,” he says sleepily.

“Another great idea,” Stiles remarks. “I’m starting to recognize them when I hear them.”

Derek sighs, content, considers driving home, and decides against it. His legs still feel like jelly.

“Hey, can I ask you something that’ll probably completely ruin the mood?” Stiles asks.

Derek glances over at him and says, “You can ask me anything.”

Stiles rubs a hand over his hair. “I think – Peter’s mad at me. And I’m not sure why. But he’s avoiding me a lot again. And it’s not like before, where he was just trying to get me to figure stuff out on my own. I can track him down, but then he just ends conversations abruptly and leaves. I don’t know why he’s doing it, and it really . . . bothers me.”

“Have you asked him about it?” Derek asks.

“I asked him if he was avoiding me and he said ‘I suppose I probably am’ and then wandered off.” Stiles shakes his head. “I even tried texting him about it, thinking maybe it was something he didn’t want to say to my face, but he just didn’t reply.” Stiles fidgets. “I know that his time in jail was really hard for him, and he’s been kind of . . . I don’t want to say . . . flighty? That’s . . . not the word I mean . . .”

“Erratic?” Derek suggests, thinking of how he would describe Peter’s behavior since his return.

“Maybe. That’s not it either. I don’t know. But we got in that fight about Seth, and since then he hasn’t really talked to me.”

“Ahhh.” Derek lets out a breath. Then he shakes his head. “I know what you’re thinking, and that’s
not it. Trust me. Peter’s not upset at your opinion of his morality. He’s not questioning all the decisions he’s made over the years, wondering if he’s killed people he didn’t have to. That’s . . . not Peter. He is what he is, and he’s always been aware of that. I think this is less about him being who he is and more about him realizing that . . . you’re not him. You might be a great Left Hand, but you’re going to do things very differently from the way he would do them.”

“You think so?” Stiles asks anxiously. “I didn’t mean to upset him. But I couldn’t just let him kill Seth. I mean, it’s not that I liked the guy. I just didn’t think he deserved to die, you know?”

“I know.” Derek leans over and kisses him. “You want my advice? Corner Peter and make him talk to you. He’s bad at shit like that. He’ll never do it if you don’t make him.”

Stiles makes a face. “I kind of figured that’s what you were going to say.”

“Sorry,” Derek says.

“I guess I’ll put that on my ‘list of things to do in my copious free time’, ” Stiles says, and yawns. Derek shakes his head a little, but turns the car on and heads for home.

~ ~ ~ ~

Isaac isn’t surprised at all to find a text from Stiles on Monday morning that reads ‘pick u up after schl?’ He stares at it for a few moments, chewing on his lower lip as he debates how to respond. He hasn’t seen Cora since Friday night, and after a truly horrific weekend, he’s desperate to see her. But his father had given him a pile of chores about ten miles high, and he knows that things will only get worse if he doesn’t do them, so after some thought he texts back, ‘can’t, too many chores’.

He presumes that will be the end of it, but Stiles asks ‘what chores?’ and Isaac figures, well, he’s being friendly, and he needs the practice at texting anyway. He’s not about to tell Stiles that he had gotten home on Friday to find the house in complete shambles and that he had spent almost all day Saturday on the floor picking up shards of glass. His hands were cut in a dozen places, and he had still missed a lot of it. He had stepped on a piece the previous evening, and now he was limping.

‘gotta mop and vacuum’, he tells Stiles. That sounds innocuous enough. Then he realizes it’s nowhere near enough chores to account for not being able to come over. ‘laundry and stuff,’ he adds.

Stiles doesn’t reply for a while, and he doesn’t think much of it, because they’re both in school, so he presumes that Stiles is in class. After fourth period, he finds a text that says, ‘we could come over and help!’ which is deeply unnerving.

‘it’s just chores,’ he says, hoping Stiles will drop it.

He does, sort of. Instead, he responds with, ‘Cora rly wants 2 c u but she’s worried she got u in trouble with ur dad’

Isaac cringes. There’s no way he wants Cora to know that his father broke every glass in the house and then made him pick up every single piece without the aid of a vacuum or a broom or anything but his bare hands. ‘I’m fine.’
Isaac has no idea how to respond to that. He’s pretty sure that once he’s over at the Hale house, he’s not going to want to leave. But he’s also pretty sure that he’s going to go nuts if he doesn’t see Cora today, and he hates the idea of her hurting and worrying about him. He’s equally certain that if Cora sees him in his current condition, she’s only going to end up more worried about him. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he mutters to himself.

He’s still thinking about how to reply when he gets another zing of deeply unnerving texts from Stiles. ‘ok gonna be honest here, if u don’t come over I’ll probably just drive her over to ur house, bc she’s gonna get all worried and I can’t say no 2 her, so u have been warned’.

‘I thought you were trying not to be a creeper,’ Isaac replies, scowling.

Stiles replies with a picture of Popeye and the phrase ‘I yam what I yam’.

After a long pause for thought, Isaac texts, ‘just pick me up after school.’

‘Will do!’ Stiles replies, as if Isaac was asking him for a favor and he hadn’t just arm-wrestled Isaac into it. Isaac shakes his head and goes back to his schoolwork. He knows that the day his father is going to find out about this is rapidly approaching, but he just doesn’t know how to handle it.

Stiles is, of course, waiting outside his school when the last bell rings. Isaac glowers at him and says, “You’re kind of a jerk.”

“Yeah, I know,” Stiles says, without much remorse. Isaac is just glad that he’s already wearing a shirt where the sleeves are too long, so nobody will notice the cuts on his hands if he’s careful. The limp, well, he’s not sure what to do about that. Put as much weight on his aching foot as possible and hope for the best.

Cora’s actually waiting for him on the front porch, and her hands are white-knuckled on the railing while Stiles parks the Jeep. She trots up to Isaac the moment he exits the car. “Are you – hi,” she modifies hastily.

“Hi,” he says, finding himself smiling and blushing now that he’s seeing her, regardless of everything else going on. “And yes, I’m okay. I’m fine.”

“Oh,” she says. “Okay. I’m sorry. I mean, I’m such a mess. Let me know if I’m being too clingy and driving you crazy, okay?”

“Okay,” he says, and then adds, “I wanted to see you.”

Cora flushes pink. “That – that’s okay then,” she says. She twines her fingers through his and tugs him into the house. As he had expected, now that he’s there, he has absolutely no desire to go home any time soon. He sits down at the kitchen table and starts his homework. Stiles makes absolutely no mention of the fact that he had promised to drive him home. He’s in the kitchen, preparing a ham to put in the oven, while Scott quizzes him on history.

Still, despite how much he’s enjoying their company, he does manage to tear himself away at five instead of six. He wants to be gone before Stiles puts dinner on the table and he’s suckered into staying another two hours. If his dad gets home and finds him working on the chores, that’ll go over better even if he hasn’t gotten a lot of them done.
Stiles can’t leave because he’s in the middle of dinner stuff, so tosses the keys to the Jeep to Scott so he can drive Isaac home. Cora wants to ride along so she can have more time with Isaac, even a measly twelve minutes. They’re just walking out the front door when Talia arrives home. She gives Isaac a warm smile and says hello, but doesn’t say ‘leaving already?’ which is what Isaac was really afraid of. She does notice the way Cora is clinging to Isaac’s side and ask her daughter if she’s all right, but Cora says she is.

Rather than pressuring Isaac to stay on this particular evening, she says, “I do hope you can come over tomorrow, Isaac. My husband is getting back from a business trip from San Diego and he always brings marvelous pastries or chocolates with him.”

“Who could say no to that?” Isaac asks, laughing nervously. Cora clings a little tighter.

“She means well,” she says, once they’re in the car.

“Who, your mom?” Isaac asks, blinking. “I know.”

“I just – she’s not coming on too strong, is she?” Cora asks. “She’s kind of got her own issues surrounding the whole mate thing.”

“I know,” Isaac says. “I mean, she’s a little intimidating, but that’s just kind of who she is. I think, uh, think she kind of tries too hard. She should mellow out.”

“I’m gonna tell her you said that,” Scott says, grinning.

“Dude! No!” Isaac protests, mostly to make Cora laugh. It works, so everything is worth it.

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After some time to think, Stiles texts Peter with a message that says, ‘we need 2 talk, avoiding me will stop. we can do this in front of everyone or u can meet me at the shed after dinner and we’ll go for a walk’. Peter isn’t present at dinner, and Stiles can’t even be sure that he’s seen the text, since he doesn’t reply to it. But when Derek and Scott are doing the dishes, he goes to the shed, and finds Peter there.

“Have you been waiting here ever since you got my text?” Stiles asks, and Peter shrugs. “You know, there was food inside and stuff.”

“I wasn’t hungry.” Peter’s playing with his wedding ring. “What do you want?”

“The answers to a few questions. Okay?” Stiles asks, and Peter just gestures for him to get on with it. Stiles takes a deep breath, lets it out. “Are you mad at me?”

Peter blinks at him, but answers readily enough. “No.”

“Are you mad that I didn’t want to kill Seth?”

Now Peter frowns slightly. “Angry? No. A bit perplexed, perhaps, but I learned a long time ago that my definition of morality rarely matches other people’s. And you were probably right, you know. He’s been unexpectedly helpful. And I don’t imagine him turning up dead or missing after saying he planted my fingerprints at Gerard Argent’s house would have helped my case very
“Okay. Then why won’t you talk to me anymore? Why do you leave whenever I come into a room?” Stiles sees Peter’s face tighten and continues to babble. “I’m still working on these cases, you know, and you said you were gonna help me, and suddenly I feel like I’m all on my own again and I don’t know why.”

Peter sighs and heaves himself to his feet. “Walk with me,” he says, and Stiles does. He walks in silence for several long minutes before he says, “Lately, I’ve found it . . . difficult to be around you. It came to my attention that I was viewing you as a substitute for my child that is dead. Now every time I see you, that’s what I think about.”

“Oh.” Stiles nearly trips over a root and barely catches himself. He has no idea what to say to that.

“I suppose it was obvious to everyone else,” Peter muses, “but we’re often blind to that which is closest. Yes, you do have some of the same traits as Olivia, and in some ways you are like me. But you’re also very different from both of us. Which is fine, I think. We would never expect our children to be carbon copies of ourselves. But, well. Your father – whom I hold in the highest regard, by the way – became somewhat offended that I was training you to be the Left Hand without his permission. He reminded me that I am not your father, and I should most likely stop making decisions about your life.”


“No, don’t try to make excuses for him. He’s absolutely correct. But since then, admittedly, your presence reminds me a little too much of what I’ve lost.”

Stiles shoves his hands into his pockets and tries to figure out how to handle this. “I still want to be your friend,” he finally says.

“Well, I do appreciate that,” Peter says. He shakes his head a little. “There’s no cure for this, Stiles. Nothing besides time. So please give me that.”

Stiles nods, feeling unbearably awkward and miserable. “What about, uh, figuring out who killed Gerard and stuff?”

“Your father has been keeping me up-to-date on your investigations by e-mail,” Peter says, “and everything I’ve found, I’ve given straight to him. We’ll get it done.”

Stiles nods again. He doesn’t know what to say, doesn’t know how to explain the lump in his throat or the fact that the words ‘please don’t do this, please don’t leave me alone’ are threatening to escape his mouth. Peter has every right to need some space, and Stiles can’t make demands of him. But he feels lonely and abandoned and strangely guilty, as if this is somehow his fault. “Okay, but . . . you shouldn’t be alone. Will you go see Talia when we get back to the house?”

Peter glances over at him, clearly surprised. Then he says, “No, not Talia. But I will . . . seek the company of someone who understands. I won’t be alone.”

“Okay,” Stiles says.
Tom takes a moment to size up the offices of the Beacon Hills First Cemetery. They’re small, and a little bit rundown. The house he had swung by earlier out of curiosity is the same way. Roger Lahey doesn’t really take care of himself or his business. That probably explains a lot about how the latter is doing.

He’s a few minutes early, so he waits in his car, thinking about how he wants to tackle things. He’s going to let Talia do most of the talking. Hilariously, in this sort of situation, he’s the muscle. Talia doesn’t actually have authority to do anything to Lahey, as much as she’s probably going to want to. He double checks to make sure all his things are in order, although they always are. He’s prepared to arrest Lahey if he has to, although he doubts it’ll come to that.

He can’t help but yawn as he sits there, waiting. It was a long night. Peter had showed up on his doorstep at about half past eight, clearly on the verge of some sort of nervous breakdown. He hadn’t wanted to talk about it, he said, he just wanted to get drunk. He had brought some sort of drug that would allow him to do so, but said Talia doesn’t approve of it and would kick his ass if she knew he had it. Tom agreed not to tell her. He’s friends with Talia, but Peter’s a grown man capable of making his own choices. Besides, Peter’s trust isn’t granted lightly. Tom isn’t about to give it up, now that he has it.

So Tom had produced the whiskey and Peter had drunk half a bottle in the first ten minutes and gotten fall-down, blind-and-stupid drunk. He told Tom the story of how he and Olivia had met and when he had found out that she was pregnant. He had raged and sobbed equally, and it had lasted for hours. Tom just let him get it out of his system. It didn’t seem like Peter had ever taken the time to really process his grief before, and Tom is honestly happy to help. Peter had finally passed out around midnight, and Tom had left him on the sofa and covered him up with a blanket. Peter had been gone when he got up, the blanket neatly folded and the coffee maker started, which Tom assumes is what passes for a thank-you from the werewolf. He has a suspicion that Peter will never mention this, but that’s okay too.

He’s startled from his thoughts by the noise of a car door, and looks up to see Talia emerging from her car. She greets Tom with her usual embrace, then knocks on the door of the office and goes in without waiting for a reply. There’s no secretary, and it’s not exactly a clean place. Tom supposes that’s fair. It’s a cemetery, not a hospital. Dirt is somewhat of a given. And he doubts that it gets many visitors; it’s not exactly a public office. But they had decided that this would be less intimidating than if they went to the man’s house.

Of course, he greets them with a sharp, “What do you want?” and Tom has to resist the urge to pull out his badge. He’s prepared to arrest Lahey, but he doesn’t want to present as a cop. He’s dressed casually, even though he’s carrying his gun and his handcuffs.

“Mr. Lahey?” Talia asks, her voice brisk but not unpleasant. “My name is Talia Hale.” She reaches out a hand, and after a moment, he shakes it. “Do you have a minute? It’s about your son.”

Lahey grunts and then gestures to a couple chairs that look worse the wear. “What’s he done now, then?”

Talia doesn’t rise to the bait. “Well, actually, I just met him this past weekend,” she says, which is fudging the details a little, but nobody’s going to complain. She’s doing her best to make it seem like Isaac met Cora completely as a coincidence, and certainly hasn’t disobeyed any of his father’s edicts. “Apparently he’s on the lacrosse team at Beacon Hills? And my pack-son, Stiles, still has friends there, and they wound up hanging out, whereupon he met my daughter Cora.”

“Yeah, so what?” Lahey asks.
“Well, and Cora really hit it off,” Talia says. “Cora would like to get to know him better. But Isaac says he isn’t allowed to date . . .?” She allows the question to trail off, obviously hoping that Lahey will correct her or back down.

“Yes,” Lahey says, picking up a stack of papers and starting to jot notes on them.

Talia glances at Tom, and he sees her make a fist and relax it. “Mr. Lahey, I’m not here to tell you how to raise your son. But let me explain a few things about werewolves to you. Once we find the person we think is our mate, we don’t let go. We can’t back off the way a human can. Now, if Isaac were unwilling, obviously Cora would have to find a way. But Isaac seems to agree with Cora on this. He seems to want to spend time with her.”

“Well, once he’s eighteen and a legal adult, he can do whatever the hell he wants,” Lahey says, “but until then, if he lives under my roof, he’ll follow my rules.”

“Do you understand that this could cause him a lot of mental and emotional anguish?” Talia asks. “Being separated from his mate?”

Lahey snorts. “Isaac’s not a werewolf. And I don’t believe half that bullshit anyway.”

“Well, Mr. Lahey, that bullshit is my life and my daughter’s life,” Talia says, and her voice has that pleasant edge to it now which Tom knows bodes ill for whoever’s on the receiving end. “And unfortunately for you, I’m going to do everything in my power to help Cora and Isaac have a healthy relationship. She’s had a rough year, my baby girl, and I care a lot more about her happiness than about your rules.”

“You – you can’t say that to me,” Lahey blusters.

“Here’s the thing, Mr. Lahey – I can. I’m just one parent expressing an opinion to another parent. I think not allowing your seventeen year old son to date is perfectly reasonable, particularly if it’s based on his school performance or his behavior at home. But I think not allowing your seventeen year old son to spend time with his mate is harmful. And you have to understand that there are certain instincts that become very difficult to override once someone is part of a pack. Isaac is part of my pack now, and that means I want to protect him.”

“So all that talk about how you’re just animals,” Lahey sneers, “I guess that’s true.”

“Or what?” Lahey challenges. “You gonna come down here and rip me apart? Risk your whole pack to teach me a lesson?”

“Or you’ll be arrested,” Tom says. He takes the handcuffs out and sets them on the table. “I’m pretty tempted to arrest you right now. You’ve all but admitted you’re abusing your son.”

“It’s none of your business how I treat my kid!” Lahey retorts.
“Actually, it is,” Tom says. He’s careful to keep his voice mild, even though he really wants to put this asshole through a wall. “You see, I’m an officer of the law, and what you’re doing is illegal. I came here to support Talia, as my son’s alpha, secure your blessing in Isaac joining her pack. I can see that that isn’t going to happen. So, let me put this to you differently. A concerned citizen came to me and reported fear that Isaac was being abused. I’ve seen evidence that he is. So this is your one and only warning. Do not lay another finger on him. Or I will throw your ass behind bars so fast that you’ll get seasick. The only – only – reason you’re not already under arrest is because I think it would be more traumatizing for Isaac if I have to put him on a witness stand to testify against you. He’s old enough that he won’t be under your roof much longer, so I’ll let this slide. Once.”

“He still – still isn’t joining your God damned pack!” Lahey shouts at Talia.

“Officially, apparently not,” Talia says. “But all the official papers provide us with is legal protection if something goes wrong and we have to step in. The lack of them won’t make the bond he has with Cora any less real. So he’s going to spend time with her, and with the rest of the pack. And I don’t care if you ‘allow it’ or not.”

With that, she rises to her feet, leaving Lahey still sputtering behind her. She takes a deep breath once she gets outside and says, “That could’ve gone better.”

Tom glances over his shoulder and says, “Actually, given his attitude, I’m pretty sure that that’s about as well as we could have hoped for. But we’d better warn Isaac before we send him home tonight . . . or if I have my preference, don’t.”

~ ~ ~
Aaron does indeed bring home a gigantic bag of pastries, which are sitting in the center of the table when Isaac gets over to the Hale house after school. Scott picked him up, and Stiles is nowhere to be seen. “It’s grill night,” Scott says, and explains that sometimes Stiles cooks at home and then brings the results over to the Hale house, because they don’t really like the smell of grilled meat.

Isaac says that’s nice of him, and in truth he’s a little glad because he’s still kind of annoyed at Stiles for arm-wrestling him into coming over the day before. He was up doing chores until midnight, and slept restlessly, and his arm aches from where his father twisted it up behind his back when he wasn’t polishing the mirrors to his satisfaction.

He always gets nervous about things like that because he’s sure that Stiles will notice, but so far he hasn’t said anything. Stiles keeps secrets for a lot of reasons, Isaac thinks, and he can never be sure when the other teenager will or won’t say anything. But it’s nice to have a little time without worrying about it.

Cora starts out in a good mood, but then she brushes against Isaac’s arm and he has to hold back a hiss of pain. She doesn’t seem to notice that specifically, and doesn’t ask about it, but from that moment on she seems moody and uncertain. Isaac wonders if she knows he’s hurt without knowing that she knows it. There’s certainly no way to ask, so he keeps his mouth shut.

It’s about quarter past five, and he’s thinking about trying to beg off to go home before Stiles shows up with dinner, when Talia comes home. She takes one of the pastries and kisses her daughter on the forehead before saying, “Isaac, can I borrow you for a minute?”

Isaac goes stiff and tense. He knows that ‘no’ is the wrong answer, but he’s never been alone with Talia, and he can’t imagine what she wants to talk with him about. It’s probably about Cora, he tells himself. She seems to want to check in with him about how Cora’s doing fairly frequently, and if that happens to be on an evening where Stiles isn’t there to be a buffer, so be it. “Uh, sure,” he says, and follows her out the back door and into the yard.

They walk about fifty yards from the house, where there’s a birdfeeder that Talia starts to fill. “I want to preface this by telling you a little bit about werewolf pack dynamics,” Talia says. “I know that . . . I can be very heavy-handed. It gets me into trouble, particularly with Stiles. That’s part of what being an alpha is. We like to be direct and to the point. If we see a problem, we fix it. With a bulldozer if necessary. So I know I’m making you nervous right now, but I want to add that if you’re angry with me after this, that’s okay. I’d understand that.”
“Oh,” Isaac says, trying to pretend he’s not terrified.

Talia caps the birdfeeder and turns to face him. “I went and talked to your father today.”

“You what?” Isaac blurts out, before he can think better of it.

“I know that you wanted to keep this secret from him,” Talia says, “and it was your right to decide when to tell him. I stepped on your toes, and for that, I’m sorry. But you were hurt yesterday. Don’t try to lie – I know it’s true. I couldn’t see it, but I could smell it. Cora can, too; she just doesn’t have enough experience to recognize it yet.”

“I wasn’t – I’m fine,” Isaac says. “Really.”

Talia gives him a look that seems soft around the edges. “I know that you’ve spent seventeen years telling everyone that,” she says, “and I know you’re going to continue to tell people that in the future. So just, right now, understand that I know it’s a lie. You don’t have to admit anything to me. But I know you aren’t fine. I know your father mistreats you. And I’m not going to allow it to happen. Because you may not have realized exactly what you were signing up for, but you’re part of my pack now. And that means that I would move mountains to protect you.”

Isaac looks away, because he has no idea what to say to that. Reiterate that he’s fine? Be angry because now he’s only going to get punished worse when he gets home? Laugh at Talia’s naïveté if she thinks she can protect him? Is there an appropriate response to that?

When he doesn’t say anything, Talia lets out a quiet sigh. “It isn’t only for your sake, though,” she says, “It’s partly for Cora’s. Because she’s not stable right now. And if she finds out you’re being hurt, I can’t predict how she’ll react. And none of us want to see the consequences if she reacts badly.”

“Oh . . . okay,” Isaac says. He makes a mental note to make sure that word of whatever punishment his father devises for him after this disaster never gets back to Cora. “I, uh . . . thanks, I guess,” he says, although he doesn’t really mean it.

“You’re welcome,” Talia says, and Isaac is relieved that she didn’t argue with him. “If you’d like to stay here tonight, you can.”

“I think . . . that’s probably not a good idea,” Isaac says, shifting from foot to foot.

Talia opens her mouth, and for a minute Isaac thinks she’s going to say something about how his father won’t hurt him anymore. But then she looks away, like she’s suddenly realized that physical pain isn’t the only kind that can be inflicted. “All right. But if you change your mind – any time, not just tonight – just let me know, okay? We have a guest room, if you think Cora’s not ready for your company at night.”

“Okay. I, uh, I’ll keep that in mind,” Isaac says. “Can I hastily exit this conversation now?”

A smile twitches at Talia’s lips. “By all means,” she says, gesturing towards the house, and Isaac retreats with more speed than dignity.

“Is everything okay?” Cora asks anxiously, as he comes back into the house.

Isaac puts a reassuring smile on his face. When it comes to his father, the situation is one hundred percent lose-lose. So he’ll let the pack handle it the way they want, since it’s obvious that he can’t stop them. He would go through Hell and back if it made Cora smile, so if that means putting up with his father being more angry than usual, it’s a price he’ll pay. “Yeah, everything’s fine, she just
wanted to talk to me about maybe breaking the news to my dad at some point.” That’s not even a lie, and Cora nods, looking relieved.

Stiles arrives with the food a few minutes later, and Isaac is about to give up his idea of escaping before dinner, but then the other teenager gives him a foil-wrapped package and says, “C’mon, I’ll drive you home while we wait for Jonathan and Derek to get home from work.”

“Oh, okay,” Isaac says. He hesitantly holds an arm out to Cora, who ducks in for a hug and gives him a kiss on the cheek. Stiles seems completely oblivious to the conversation that Talia had with Isaac’s father, although Isaac has learned by now that he can never be certain of what Stiles does and doesn’t know. Either way, he doesn’t say anything about it. Stiles chatters about a bunch of things, but none of them are related to Isaac.

The house is quiet and empty when he gets there. He puts the grilled ribs in the oven to keep them warm and studies the mess his father has left for him with a sigh.

He’s still working on cleaning up when he hears the garage door open. He freezes despite himself, then redoubles his efforts to clean up the grimy floor. He keeps his head down and continues scrubbing when his father comes into the house, sinking into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Well,” he says, “I hear you’ve gone and made some friends.”

Isaac says nothing, because he knows there’s no right answer to that question.

“Seems you’ve been telling them some stories.”

“No, sir,” Isaac says quickly, because to be fair, he really hadn’t been.

“Really? Because it seems to me that you think that your new friends can protect you. Is that what you think?”

“No, sir,” Isaac repeats, scrubbing harder.

“Good. You hungry?”

This abrupt shift of tone has Isaac looking up, peeking through his bangs. He takes a guess at the right answer. “Yes? There are, uh, ribs in the oven – ”

“I brought some take-out home.” Isaac’s father sets down a bag on the table that’s been sitting by his feet, and starts withdrawing Styrofoam containers. Isaac hesitantly gets up, takes the ribs out of the oven, and puts them in the refrigerator for later. He gets out a beer for his father and a glass of water for himself. Then the smell hits him and his nose wrinkles involuntarily. “Did you, uh, did you get – ”

“Just some Mexican. Sit down, Isaac.”

Isaac does as he’s told. His father shoves one of the containers over to him. It’s just a couple of enchiladas covered in some sort of green sauce. He hesitantly takes a bite and then cringes. It’s spicy. *Really* spicy. He’s never really liked spicy food. “Dad, I – ”

“Eat your dinner,” his father says, staring him down.

“Yes, sir,” Isaac says, forcing himself to take another bite. It feels like his mouth is catching fire. His inner ears actually *hurt* from the intensity of it. He swallows as quickly as he can without choking himself and looks down at the full container in front of him with despair.
“So, I think we’re going to need to set up some new ground rules,” Lahey says, “given the new lay of the land. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, sir,” Isaac manages, shoveling another bite in. The faster he eats it, the sooner it’ll be over.

“I still expect you to keep this place cleaned up,” Lahey says, just watching his son while he eats. “And get dinner on the table.”

“Yes, sir,” Isaac says. He wipes the back of his hand over his eyes, feeling involuntary tears starting. He’s sweating now, and the room feels too hot.

“Be nice if you could get your grades up, but I’ve pretty much given up on that from your dumb ass,” Lahey continues.

“Yes, sir,” Isaac repeats, not bothering to argue or point out that his grades actually have improved a lot since he started hanging out with the pack. He’s not bad at schoolwork, he just has never really had the time or attention for it while at home. And he’s never had anyone to ask for help before. He hadn’t wanted to at first, but after watching how patient everyone was when Stiles needed help, he had hesitantly asked Cora to help him figure out a math problem. Everyone there is good at some subject or another, and they’ve been amazingly kind about helping him figure stuff out.

“If you get this girl pregnant, you won’t get a dime of help from me.”

Isaac winces and mumbles another ‘yes sir’ and doesn’t argue, despite the multiple reasons he could give his father for why that isn’t going to happen any time soon, if ever.

“You believe all this mating bullshit?” Lahey asks, and Isaac just shrugs. “Talia Hale seemed to think it would cause you great emotional distress if you were separated from your new girlfriend. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Isaac says. It’s always safer not to have an opinion when his father asks questions like that.

“Because I wouldn’t want to cause you emotional distress. You know that, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Isaac says, ignoring the tears streaming down his face and the fact that his ears and throat are throbbing.

“Of course, I don’t really appreciate being told how to raise my child,” Lahey says, “but I imagine an alpha like Hale thinks she can walk all over whoever she likes.”

Isaac mumbles something he hopes sounds appropriate, shovels the last of the food in his mouth, and swallows so quickly that he nearly chokes. Then he takes a long drink from his glass of water, despite knowing that it won’t actually help.

“Downstairs,” his father says.

Isaac winces, but he knew that was coming, and he doesn’t argue. He doesn’t even stop to drink more of his water, since it wasn’t helping anyway. He silently gets up and goes down the stairs, takes off his shoes, sandwiches himself into the freezer. He can feel his heartbeat starting to thud in his chest. His palms are sweating. But he forces himself not to look as his father closes the lid.

It’s just one night, he tells himself, like he always tells himself. He can handle one night. He takes deep breaths, concentrates on the pain in his ears and throat to keep himself grounded. Minutes
drag by. He already knows he won’t sleep. He hardly ever sleeps when he’s in the freezer. It’s too uncomfortable. He’s rarely in it all night. His father normally puts him in for an hour or two, to teach him a lesson. But sometimes it’s longer, and he knows it will be this time. When his father lets him out in the morning, he’ll barely be able to walk. He hopes he doesn’t piss himself. It might be difficult, given how much water he drank at dinner. But he supposes worse things have happened to him.

He’s still concentrating on his breathing, knowing that he’s edging towards hyperventilation, when he feels a buzz in his pocket. It startles him, and he nearly knocks his head on the top of the freezer. It takes some awkward contortions, but he manages to pull his new phone out of his back pocket. He had almost forgotten he had it. Certainly it hadn’t occurred to his father to confiscate it.

There’s a new text from Cora, and it’s like the walls of the freezer have all been pushed out a few inches. His breathing slows down a little as he pulls it up. It reads, ‘I’m glad I got to see you today.’

‘me too,’ Isaac texts back.

‘what are you doing?’ Cora asks.

Isaac thinks about it, then replies, ‘just sitting around’. Werewolves can’t hear lies over text, so that’s nice.

‘me too. Wanna play questions?’

‘sure,’ Isaac says, because he would agree to anything Cora asks.

‘what’s your favorite color?’

‘green,’ he replies. ‘yours?’

‘purple! your turn.’

Isaac hesitates, then says, ‘favorite season? Mine is autumn.’

‘spring,’ Cora replies. ‘favorite fruit?’

‘watermelon, but only before it gets super ripe,’ Isaac says.

They text back and forth until Cora says she’s sleepy and has to finish up her homework before bed. Isaac holds onto the phone and rereads their silly, pointless conversation over and over again, and eventually he falls asleep, curled into a little ball and holding the phone against his chest.

~ ~ ~

Leftover night has become Stiles’ night to stay at his own house and work with his father both on the cases that he’s supposed to be contributing to and those he isn’t. Tom has rearranged his schedule to accommodate, working longer hours when Stiles is busy with school and denmaking so he can take Wednesday afternoons off.

They’re sorting through financial records when Tom’s phone rings, and he picks it up absently. “Sheriff Stilinski . . . oh? Oh, yes! Thanks for . . . mm hm. Okay.” There’s a long silence. Stiles isn’t really listening, presuming it’s job-related and therefore not for him. “Really,” his father says,
and then, “Really. Okay. Yes, that would be great. Let me give you my e-mail . . .”

He talks for another minute while Stiles crosses out the name of an alpha from the Fresno area from their list because bank records show she was in Florida at the time of Gerard’s murder. Then Tom hangs up and says, “Guess who that was?”

“Do you really want me to? We could be here all day,” Stiles says, and his father snorts and shakes his head.

“Felicia Stewart,” he says. “Leo Stewart’s wife. I’ve been leaving her messages for a few days.”

“Did she have anything that might have been helpful?”

“Well, she says the reason it took her so long to call back was because she was looking into some things. Apparently, among the things she got from the police after her husband disappeared – she was able to claim some of his personal effects – was a ring of keys they found at his apartment. Nobody had been able to match them to anything. Well, the idea that he might have had a storage unit hadn’t occurred to her. She went around to the different storage units until she found one that said the keys matched their lockers. Then she persuaded them to show her a list of everyone who had gotten a unit around the same time as her husband closed his PI business and went off on whatever trail he was on before he disappeared.”

“But we know it wasn’t registered in his name,” Stiles says.

“No, but she says she knew it when she saw it, because her husband always liked word jumbles. Anagrams. And there was one leased to a Wes Tartelo. She tried the key and it fit.”

“Oh my God!” Stiles flails in excitement. “What was in there?”

“Nothing that she could make any heads or tails of. But she said she’s scanned it all into her computer and she’s going to e-mail it to me.”

“E-mail isn’t secure,” Stiles says, shifting uncomfortably.

“I know. She said she’s going to do it from a public place with a new gmail account that she’ll create just for this and then never use again. Someone might know we got it, but they won’t know who sent it. Anyway, I doubt they’re scanning every e-mail ever sent.”

Stiles supposes that’s true. He’s on pins and needles while waiting, but forces himself to continue going through financial records. Out of the eight sets they’ve managed to get, they’ve ruled four of the alphas out. Deucalion, unfortunately, is not one of them. His financial records don’t show that he was in Santa Rosa at any point near Gerard’s murder, but they don’t show that he wasn’t, either.

When the e-mail finally arrives, Tom pulls it up on his laptop and Stiles leans over his shoulder, practically chomping at the bit to get at the new information. Before long, they’re both blinking. “Well, I can see why she couldn’t figure it out,” Stiles says. It’s pages and pages of scientific articles and chemical formulas. Most of them seem to be about the nature of lycanthropy and various studies that had been done on why it occurred, how it might be prevented, and the numerous attempts that had been made to find a cure. “I don’t get it,” Stiles says. “Why would he have this stuff locked up? It’s available on websites and stuff.”

Tom continues scrolling. Further down, there are several autopsy reports for the babies that died. He skims through them, but doesn’t see anything that contradicts what they already knew. Then there’s two pages of mathematical formulas.
“Wait,” Stiles says. “Wait. We might have been on the right track. I can’t do the math, but I recognize that math. It’s probabilities. Statistics. He was trying to figure out the odds that all the babies were werewolves. See, he’s got all these initials – NF, MS, RR – those are the initials of the babies. And next to each one is a percentage: 100%, 85%, 20% - that’s the likelihood that each one would have been a werewolf. And then all the math below it is putting together all those individual probabilities to determine what the odds were that every baby would’ve been a werewolf.”

“Seven percent, apparently,” Tom says, putting on his reading glasses.

“So all this other research, this chemical stuff, it must be that he was trying to figure out who would make the type of poison the kids got,” Stiles says.

“Well, hell, son,” Tom says, “I thought there were lots of things that were toxic to werewolves. Wolfsbane, for example.”

“Yeah, but wolfsbane is also toxic to humans,” Stiles says. “It’s aconite. Now, it takes higher doses to be lethal in humans, but in babies, it would probably do just as much damage. They couldn’t exactly inject a bunch of babies with silver nitrate, either. If they wanted something that would be completely harmless to humans, we’re talking about a tailor-made compound.”

Tom taps a finger against his mouth. “Now, what anti-werewolf organization do we know that had the capability to make that kind of chemical?”

Stiles rubs a hand over his hair. “I can see that the WLO might have been involved. But I still don’t know why they never did it again.”

“Well, they might have thought they accidentally killed a bunch of human babies,” Tom says.

“It’s not like Kate Argent would’ve cared.”

“True,” Tom says, “but the WLO had more people in it than Kate Argent.” He goes back up and begins to scroll through the pages of chemical formulas. “Okay, this one has a logo on it. Let’s see if that gets us anywhere.”

“Let me, I’ll reverse Google Image it,” Stiles says, practically grabbing the laptop from his father. Three minutes later, they’ve identified the company.

“Hunh,” Tom says.

“What, what?” Stiles says.

“Well, their main facility is in Toledo, Ohio,” Tom says, “which is Leo Stewart’s last known location, according to the charges on his credit card, before he went missing.”

“Oh my God! We should go there,” Stiles says.

“We can’t. They closed,” Tom says, continuing to type. “Less than a month after the shooting last summer and subsequent indictment of half the WLO. The entire business just quietly shut down. No bankruptcy, no buy-out, no nothing. Just . . . no company.”

“Suspicious,” Stiles says.

“Yep. But something of a dead end, unfortunately. At least for now.” Tom takes off his reading glasses and starts to polish them. “Let me talk to the police in Chicago and Toledo and see if we can get a warrant to find out what, if any, records are left. You’ve still got all your WLO research,
“See if you can find anything in there about anyone who lived or worked in Toledo. And we’ll go from there.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Derek glances up from his plants as he hears footsteps behind him. He sees Isaac approaching from the house, shifting from foot to foot and looking intensely uncomfortable. Derek offers him a smile, hoping to put him at ease. The teenager has seemed tired and a little moody for the past few days, but Derek knows that he’s probably got a lot on his mind. “Hey. What’s up?”

“I, uh . . .” Isaac rubs a hand over the back of his head. “I was hoping to get a little advice.”

“Sure,” Derek says, and goes back to what he’s doing, carefully pruning the bushes around the front steps. “What’s up?”

“I thought it might be nice to, uh, actually take Cora out somewhere,” Isaac says, “like a real date, you know? But I don’t really know if she’d be ready for it yet. I don’t want to ask her and for her to feel like she has to say yes or it’ll hurt my feelings. But I don’t want to never ask and make her feel like I don’t want to go anywhere with her.”

Derek nods a little, and smiles because he can’t help himself. It’s just such a relief seeing Isaac be so mindful of Cora’s feelings. “I think as long as you preface it with ‘if you’re ready and it’s okay if you’re not’, then Cora won’t feel pressured. I know that she knows how messed up this whole thing made her.”

“Okay,” Isaac says. “I mean, if you think so.”

“Well, have a backup plan,” Derek says, “so if Cora says she doesn’t want to, just say ‘okay, instead of that, why don’t we do such-and-such instead’. That’s easy enough, just say if she doesn’t want to go just the two of you, you can double with me and Stiles, or Scott and Allison.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s a good idea,” Isaac says. “So . . . what kind of stuff does she like to do?”

“Cora likes . . . fun stuff,” Derek says, and waves a hand. “I’m sorry, that was lame. But it’s true. She doesn’t need anything expensive or grand. She’d be happy at an arcade playing air hockey and Skee-Ball, or building sandcastles at the lake, or going for a picnic. She likes bowling and mini-golf and that sort of thing.”

“Mini-golf might be fun,” Isaac says, perking up a little. “There’s that place on the north side of town that has the ice cream stand right next to it. I know she loves ice cream.”

Derek nods encouragingly. “And it’s right on the lake, so if she’s having a good time, you could go for a walk around the park afterwards. There’d be plenty of people around, so maybe she wouldn’t get so nervous.”


Derek smiles a little. “No problem. I’m glad to help. Has Cora told you how she basically had to plan every date I had with Stiles before we got things worked out?”

“She says you were pretty hopeless, yeah. Apparently you brought him to a bookstore.”
“He loved that bookstore, that was our best pre-understanding date, and don’t let Cora tell you differently.”

“She doesn’t,” Isaac says, grinning. “She just says you’re both gigantic nerds.”

“Hard to argue, really,” Derek says. He shakes his head a little as Isaac goes back into the house, and goes back to what he was doing. It’s almost an hour later before he goes inside. Stiles is busy in the kitchen, and Cora is leaning against the counter, chatting with him cheerfully. Derek gives Stiles a kiss on the back of the neck, then squeezes Cora’s shoulder as he passes by.

He thinks that maybe Isaac hasn’t even asked her yet, she’s so chipper, but when he comes in from getting his tools put away, she’s telling Stiles about the little shops by the lake and how much she loves the cheap jewelry and the flower stand. “Do you think he’ll buy me flowers?” Cora gushes, and Derek makes a mental note to make absolutely certain that Isaac buys her flowers.

“Looking forward to your date?” he asks his little sister.

“Yeah,” she says. “I mean, I’m super nervous, but . . . yeah.”

“Nervous is okay,” Stiles says. “I was nervous on my first dates with Derek.”

“Well, you guys had issues . . .”

“Dude, you and Isaac don’t?” Stiles asks, and Cora laughs a little. “Just take it easy. You two are doing great.”

Cora blushes a little, but agrees. She leans over and kisses Stiles on the cheek before bouncing out of the kitchen. Derek watches her go, then leans against Stiles. “It occurs to me that I never said thank you,” he says. “For tracking Isaac down, bringing him into the pack.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that, geez,” Stiles says.

“I know I don’t have to,” Derek says, “but still, thank you.” He nuzzles at Stiles’ neck. “Do you have any plans for the evening?”

Stiles hesitates, then says, “If I said ‘look through mug-shots of former WLO members and try to match them to Seth’s description of Jack Babylon’, would that be bad?”

“Not unless I can’t help,” Derek says, and Stiles huffs but then gives a little nod. “Why the WLO, though?”

With a shrug, Stiles says, “I don’t know if they were involved. But they’ve produced drugs tailored to werewolves before, and the drugs Cora was getting are definitely designer. Not just in their existence – I mean, what she was given is actually pretty similar to scopolamine, which can effect the central nervous system of a human, making them compliant, easily suggestible. But werewolves burn through drugs so quickly, the drug had to be modified and then dosed specifically for Cora. Given that someone else in the WLO is probably the most likely to have known about Gerard’s plan to get the bite, it’s a connection we can’t ignore.”

Derek nods. “You know, we’ve been ignoring the possibility that Gerard didn’t plan it. I mean, if the alpha ambushed him.”

“I haven’t ignored it,” Stiles says, “I just don’t think it’s likely. It’s just too complicated a way to kill someone. I think they heard he was trying to get the bite – maybe he approached whatever alpha they’re working with – and came up with the plan from there. If they wanted to frame Peter,
why use a method that he couldn’t have been one hundred percent responsible for?”

“Sensible enough,” Derek says, with another nod. “Okay. I’m going to go jump in the shower. How much longer before dinner?”

Stiles glances over his shoulder at a timer on the stove. “About fifteen minutes.”

“Okay.” Derek gives him another kiss and then heads upstairs.

~ ~ ~ ~
Okay, my lovelies, I'm back! Thanks for all your well-wishes! Check out my tumblr if you want to see some photos I took during the trip. ^_^ Also I really love this chapter, I had a lot of fun with it.

Isaac doesn’t have a car, or for that matter, a driver’s license. He doesn’t want Cora picking him up at the house, after what Talia had said to him about how she might react if she knew about his father. Derek agrees to pick him up instead, which is a huge relief.

“You look fine,” Derek says, as soon as he gets in the car.

Isaac nervously pushes his hair out of his face. “I wasn’t gonna ask,” he says, which is true. His wardrobe consists entirely of T-shirts and jeans. There’s literally nothing he can do to make himself look attractive to a girl. He can’t even wear the scarf Cora gave him, because it’s sunny and in the seventies and he doesn’t want to spontaneously combust.

“I know,” is all Derek says in response, and Isaac finds that he does feel better having heard it.

Derek drives them back to the Hale house in relative silence except for the music on the radio.

Isaac tries not to doze off. He’s barely slept in days. When he isn’t spending the night in the freezer, his father is waking him up every hour or two and giving him more chores to do. He’s gotten in trouble for falling asleep in school twice, and one time he had skipped school altogether just so he could get some sleep. His father can’t leave bruises on him anymore, but that doesn’t mean he hasn’t found dozens of other, subtler ways to make Isaac pay for what’s happened. He hopes it isn’t obvious.

Cora is dressed in a little sundress and has done her hair in two braids and she’s just about the cutest, most amazing thing that Isaac has ever seen. He knows he’s turning pink, but that’s strangely okay because Cora is, too. “Um, hi,” she offers.

“Hi,” he says. “You look, um, you look really good.”

“Thanks,” she says, blushing harder. Derek rolls his eyes and proceeds further into the house, and Cora recovers enough to call after him, “Don’t you roll your eyes at me! You were nine times this incompetent!”

“No lies detected,” Derek calls back, and somewhere in the house, Isaac hears Stiles laughing.

Cora clears her throat and says, “C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

Isaac nods and goes with her. He folds himself into the front seat of her car and says, “So . . . why a Prius?”
Cora glances over at him and says, “When my parents decided to get me a car when I turned sixteen, it was mostly so I could drive myself to school. I mean . . . there is a bus service at Super High, but because it’s a regional high school, the ride can get really long, and so it was either that or one of my parents or sibs find a way to drive me. So my parents told me they would get me a car. They said they would get me any practical car I wanted and they would pay for it, but I would have to pay for my own gas money. So . . . I got a Prius.”

“Brilliant,” Isaac says, smiling at her.

“I actually like it,” Cora says, “but don’t tell any of the others. I mean, Derek’s got his Camaro and my dad has that monster truck, so neither of them would ever understand.”

“That’s probably why your parents insisted you get a practical car,” Isaac says. “They didn’t want to encourage another one of those in the family.”

Cora laughs and they chat on the way to the mini-golf place and it feels nice, natural. Isaac expected to be nervous, and he is, but it fades after a while and he stops noticing it. Cora finds a parking space in the shade and they get their clubs and balls.

“I haven’t done this in forever,” Isaac says, looking skeptically at the first, simple course.

“Keep your eye on the ball,” Cora says sagely.

“I think that’s for baseball,” Isaac tells her.

“Well, I don’t see why it wouldn’t apply here,” Cora says with an impish smile.

Isaac turns out to be tolerably mediocre at mini-golf. Cora is fairly good at it, even getting a couple hole-in-ones towards the beginning of the course. Then they reach a course where the hole is at the top of a hill, and no matter how hard he tries, Isaac just can’t get it. Cora’s laughing so hard that she’s crying, leaning against a fence as he tries for the ninth time. It goes past the hole and rolls right back down the hill.

“Who invented this?” Isaac says.

“You’re supposed to – stop after six,” Cora says, still giggling merrily.

“Why didn’t you tell me that three tries ago?” Isaac says, snatching up the little orange ball, and she just laughs harder.

Somehow he makes it through the rest of the course without getting kicked in the teeth too many times, and afterwards they get ice cream at the little stand right next door. They eat at a little picnic table and enjoy the breeze.

“Do you – want to go for a walk around the lake?” Isaac asks, somewhat hesitantly. Cora nods, and Isaac holds out his hand and then holds his breath. But Cora takes it, twining her fingers through his, and they start down the path. They don’t talk very much, which Isaac thinks is nice. He doesn’t feel the need to fill the air with words to distract Cora from the fact that they’re alone together.

“Hey, wildflowers,” she says, darting off the path.

“I like the purple ones,” he says. “Do you know what they’re called?”

“Nope. Derek would, but I don’t.”
Isaac picks one and tucks it behind her ear. “There. You’re perfect.”

Cora turns pink. “Okay,” she says. She picks a dandelion and nestles it behind Isaac’s ear. “Now you’re perfect, too,” she says, and Isaac laughs. “Do you ever wish on dandelions? You know, once they’ve gone to fluff.”

“Not in a long time,” Isaac says. “I guess I grew out of that sort of wishing.”

“I still do it,” Cora confesses. “I wish on falling stars and stuff. I mean, I don’t think it’s magic. But I think maybe, if you want something bad enough and you’re willing to work hard enough, anything’s possible.”

Isaac wishes that were true. But he knows it isn’t. They start walking again. “If you had a wish right now, what would it be?”

Cora thinks about it. “That . . . I could stay right here, in this moment. Where I feel safe, and warm, and happy.”

“Don’t wish for that,” Isaac says, surprising both of them.

“Why not?” Cora asks.

“Because . . . there’s going to be more moments like this. A lot more. You wouldn’t want to miss them, would you?”

Cora’s blushing again. “No, I guess not,” she says. “What would you wish for?”

Isaac hesitates, but he doesn’t want to lie. “I wouldn’t. I don’t believe in making wishes.”

“Why not?” Cora asks.

“Because the last thing I wished for was that Camden would come home safe. And he didn’t.”

Cora winces. Then she says quietly, “I know what that’s like, at least. I miss my brothers, too.”

They walk for another few minutes in silence.

“I’m sorry,” Isaac says. “I didn’t mean to ruin things.”

“No, you didn’t,” Cora says. “And you’re right. I mean . . . that I want there to be more moments like this.”

“Okay,” Isaac says.

They finish their walk around the lake. The sun is starting to set. Cora says, “Do you want to come over for a while? I have to baby-sit, but I know the kids love you. I think Stiles was going to do stuffed potatoes.”

“I can’t,” Isaac says. “I promised my dad I’d help him out at the cemetery tonight. Burials are usually on Sundays, so . . . there’s always a lot of work to do on Saturday night.”

“Oh,” Cora says. “Okay. I’ll drive you home, then.”

Isaac doesn’t have a good excuse for her not to, so he gets back in the car and gives Cora directions back to his house. When they reach it, she pulls up at the curb and gets out. “I had a good time today,” she says, and stands up to give him a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you Monday?”
“Yeah,” Isaac says, trying to control his blush reflex. “I’ll see you then.”

~ ~ ~

It’s half past nine when Stiles realizes that he is absolutely out of clean clothes at the Hale house. Since doing laundry is obviously an option of last resort (he is, after all, a teenaged boy), he decides to run back to his father’s house, where he knows he still has some. This actually works in his favor, because he left some of his files there the last time he was home, and he wants to look some things up in the nursery case, things that have been nagging at him.

Derek is comfortably sprawled across his bed with a book and a mug of tea, so Stiles doesn’t ask for company. “I’ll be back,” he says, giving Derek a kiss before he heads down to the Jeep. It’s about a twenty minute drive back to his own house, and it’s a nice night. He drives with the windows down and plays loud music.

His father’s cruiser is in the driveway, so Stiles shouts, “Hey, Dad, it’s me,” as he barrels down the hallway. He’s brought up short when he sees that his father isn’t the only one in the living room. Peter is sitting there, holding what looks like a bottle of whiskey, and the werewolf blinks up at him languidly as he approaches.

“Hey, Stiles,” Tom says, obviously surprised. “I didn’t think you were going to be home tonight.”

“Oh, I just came home to grab some stuff,” Stiles says, trying to figure out how to ask Peter what the heck he’s doing there without being rude. “I’m out of clean, well, everything.”

“Stiles!” Peter says, looking up at him with eyes that are somewhat glassy. He moves like he’s going to get off the sofa, but then sinks back down into the cushions. “I’ve been hearing stories about your mother. She sounds like a wonderful lady. Tom says that you’re a lot like her.”

“Uh . . . thanks,” Stiles says, blinking at them both.

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“Uh . . . thanks,” Stiles says, blinking at them both.

“And I . . .” Peter pauses to take a long pull at the bottle. “I’m so sorry for your loss. Humans, you know, you can be amazing. The way you can recover from loss. We can’t do that. We aren’t wired like that. It’s biological. But mystical. No. Mystical. It doesn’t make a damned bit of sense, actually.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Uh, Dad? What’s going on? Is he . . . Uncle Peter, are you drunk?”

Tom gives a little nod, and Peter declares, “I am absolutely plastered. It’s really very enjoyable. Please don’t look up to me as a role model. There’s a huge variety of reasons why that would be a terrible idea.”

“I’ll, um, I’ll remember that,” Stiles says, completely confounded by this turn of events.

Peter sees the confusion on his face. “Your father,” he says, “has been good enough to let me crash here when I feel the need to get fall-down drunk in order to deal with Olivia’s death. He understands, see. Because of your mother. He doesn’t judge me. Talia would judge me. She would do that . . . disapproving thing that she does. About which I’d say really couldn’t care less, but that would be a lie, because she’s the alpha, so . . .”

Tom shakes his head a little and stands up, going into the kitchen to get himself a new drink. Stiles
notices that his father is drinking coffee, not liquor. Somewhat quietly, Tom says to Stiles, “Don’t worry about this, Stiles. Peter’s been coming here a couple times a week for the last few weeks. He just needs some space to blow off some steam and talk to someone who understands.”

Stiles nods. He’s about to say that he’ll go get his clothes when something occurs to him. “Wait, how are you drunk? I thought werewolves couldn’t get drunk.”

“This is a fascinating subject,” Peter says, gesturing with the bottle. “In 1971 – ”

“There’s a drug,” Tom interrupts, before Peter can give a history lesson. “It renders werewolves vulnerable to alcohol and other drugs.”

“Actually that is kind of fascinating,” Stiles says. “I mean, it doesn’t – there’s no cure for lycanthropy, so how does it work?”

“That is true,” Peter says. “You can take the man out of the wolf but you can’t take the wolf out of the man. This isn’t a cure. Every effort to find a cure has resulted in a lot of dead werewolves.” He takes another swig of whiskey. “It’s just . . . a dialing down. I’m still a werewolf. I can still shift, I can still heal. But some of the factors that go along with it – strength, speed, et cetera – are mitigated. I still have a much higher liquor tolerance than the average human, but I can get drunk. Thank God.”

“A lot . . . of dead werewolves,” Stiles says blankly. His eyes go wide. “Dad! I think I figured it out!”

“Figured what out?” Tom asks.

“The babies! The poisoned babies! The WLO wasn’t trying to kill them. They were trying to cure them. Testing out something that they thought might be a cure for lycanthropy. Adults wouldn’t take it voluntarily, so give it to a bunch of werewolf babies. That’s why they haven’t done it again. Because it didn’t work, it didn’t accomplish what they meant it to. If they could cure infants under the radar – ”

“They could actually eliminate lycanthropy altogether,” Tom says. “Jesus. The number of werewolves being born would start dropping. Nobody would know why. All they would need is someone who could slip into the nurseries and administer the drug . . . .”

“That’s why Leo Stewart had all those articles about lycanthropy research and the different people trying to find a cure,” Stiles says. “He must have figured out somehow that that’s what they were trying to do. And he tracked it back to that facility in Toledo, which must be where they were manufacturing whatever drug cocktail they had come up with.”

“Have you had a chance to look through your WLO records for that facility?” Tom asks.

Stiles shakes his head. “I’ve been too busy. But you bet your ass I’ll do it now.”

“It’s one hell of a theory,” Tom says, “but I think it makes everything fit together.” He gives Stiles a back-slapping hug. “Even if you’re wrong, I’m still proud of you.”

“To dead babies!” Peter says, raising his bottle, and both Stiles and Tom give a wince. Stiles is about to say something, maybe give a hasty excuse to run screaming from the house, when Peter continues. “See, that’s part of what makes you so much more like Tom than like me. Your talent for mysteries. I’m not like that, you know. When I have a mystery to solve, I go straight to the source and bully the answer out of people. You can actually put the pieces together on your own. That’s very impressive, you know.”
“Uh . . . thanks, Uncle P,” Stiles says.

“Olivia was very smart, you know,” Peter says. “She was a genius. She loved being the denmaker. People didn’t realize she had a double bachelor’s in journalism and political science. She did research and wrote articles in her free time. She loved history, too. We went on an archaeological dig for our honeymoon.”

“That sounds nice, Peter,” Stiles says, thinking that if Peter wants to talk about Olivia, he should let him.

“We didn’t meet at the Ceremonies, you know,” Peter says. “Actually, we met at a coffee shop. She spilled her coffee and said a word that nice ladies shouldn’t know. The guy behind the counter was a jerk about it, so I bought her a new one. And I knew . . . I knew. But it wasn’t part of the Ceremonies. So I couldn’t just . . . claim her. I asked her out to dinner, but I didn’t say anything about being a werewolf. We dated for about two months before I told her. And do you know what she said?”

“What?” Stiles asks.

“She said ‘how stupid do you think I am’?” Peter laughs, but wipes his eyes, because he’s starting to cry. “She knew all along . . . and I had no idea. I asked her to marry me that night. And she said yes. And she . . .”

“Stiles,” Tom says quietly, as Peter starts to sob into a napkin, and the teenager is shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. “You should go. Let me take care of this, okay?”

Stiles nods. He’s not one to run from a fight, but this – what can he do with this? “I’m just gonna, uh,” he says, and practically jogs out of the house. Screw clean laundry. He can wear Derek’s clothes for a day. Then he remembers the WLO files, and winces. He creep back into the house, goes up to his room, and gets what he needs. Then he makes a run for it.

Derek’s fallen asleep by the time he gets back to the Hale house, sprawled out on the bed with his book on his chest. Stiles can’t help but smile, taking the book out of his hands and tucking him in. He sits down with his files, but he’s tense and fidgety. He can’t help but think about Peter, about how much he’s obviously suffering.

After the first half hour of useless research, he decides to get up and make himself some tea. He finds Talia in the kitchen, doing the same. “You’re up late,” she says.

“Oh, yeah,” he says. “You know. Adderall and case files. I’ll go to bed soon.”

Talia nods a little and adds some water into the kettle for him. “Are you okay?” she asks. “I don’t want to pry, but you seem a little out of sorts.”

Stiles shifts from foot to foot. He knows that the alpha is more connected to the other wolves in the pack than everyone else, but he doesn’t know how much she knows about what Peter’s going through. Certainly, it seems, she doesn’t know about his methods of dealing with it. “I just, uh, I ran home to get some stuff and apparently my dad and Uncle Peter have decided to make friends and bond over mutual losses. It was a little disconcerting. To see Peter . . . upset like that.”

“Ah.” Talia’s face softens. “He has been . . . very distressed lately. But I think his friendship with your father is good for him.”

“Sure didn’t look it,” Stiles says despite himself.
Talia’s quiet for a long minute. “Grieving is a process that can be messy on the outside,” she finally says. “But it doesn’t help to keep it all in. Peter never really worked through his grief until now. Only his rage. And now that he’s gotten his revenge . . . he’s realizing that it doesn’t change what he lost.” She reaches out and squeezes Stiles’ shoulder. “I think it’s a good thing, Stiles. I think . . . this is how he’ll learn to cope long-term.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says with a sigh. “I guess you’re right. I just . . . I don’t like to see him hurting.”

“Neither do I,” Talia says. “But we can’t take away his pain, more’s the pity. All we can do is try to be there for him.”

“Sometimes I think . . .” Stiles won’t look at her. “I think back to the hospital. When I asked him to stay. I know that he planned to . . . to leave, after he had gotten his revenge. But I asked him to stay. For my sake. Was that selfish?”

“I don’t know, Stiles,” Talia says wearily. “God knows I think back to the day of the fire and wonder often enough if I should have let him go. Let him at least try to save Olivia and the baby. He would have died almost certainly, but . . . maybe that would have been better. I don’t think that’s the sort of question we can really answer. We both tried to do what we thought was best. And to be fair . . . if Peter was determined to die, we wouldn’t be having this discussion, because he would have been in the ground a long time ago. He stays for the pack . . . but there’s a part of him that stays for himself. So I think we’ll have to be content with that.”

The kettle starts to whistle. Talia turns away and pours the water into each mug, then offers one to Stiles. He dips his tea bag in, thinking. If Peter hadn’t been there to help him the year previous, it was likely that all the Hales, and quite possibly Stiles himself, would be dead. Life has far too many what-ifs for him to stop and question everything. Talia was right. All he could do was try to do what he thought was best.

“Hey, Talia?” he says. “Do you consider Deucalion a friend?”

Talia purses her lips and considers this. “I would more consider him a friendly acquaintance. Why?”

“Because . . . I can’t quite figure out if he should be a suspect or not. Part of me thinks it’s a pretty big coincidence that he suddenly turned up in your life again right after Cora brought Seth home. He’s been investigating the WLO – he could have easily found out that Gerard wanted the bite, and used that to kill him. But I know that all the alphas have . . . their own hierarchy, and trade favors. I don’t want to make trouble for you.”

Talia’s quiet for a minute. “I like Duke,” she says, “but I won’t say that what you’re suggesting is impossible. I can’t fathom his motive – but my guess is that you can’t either. But on the subject of the alphas . . . you’re right. And that’s why I have a Left Hand. It’s my job to be Duke’s friend. To support him in his endeavors, to be his equal. It’s Peter’s job – and yours, if you want it – to go behind my back and kill him, if he’s a threat to the pack. I don’t need to know about it. I don’t want to know about it. Some questions are better left unanswered.”

Stiles folds his arms over his stomach and blurts out, “What if I don’t want that job?”

Talia blinks at him, surprised, and then her face softens. “Oh, Stiles,” she says, and pulls him into an embrace. “I’m so sorry. I should have put a stop to this a long time ago. It’s my fault that you didn’t feel comfortable coming to me with this.” She pulls out a chair and sits down. “You don’t have to do anything that you’re not comfortable doing. No matter what Peter tells you. Peter . . . makes presumptions, sometimes, about what other people are willing to do, or capable of. But
there’s no rule that says you have to accept the role of the Left Hand if you don’t want it. Even if you weren’t the denmaker. Not every pack member has a role. Jonathan doesn’t. Cora doesn’t. The bigger the pack, the more members there are who just . . . add to the whole, without taking on anything specific.”

“I want to protect the pack,” Stiles says. “I don’t think I could handle anyone in the pack getting hurt. I want to help. And maybe I could kill somebody, if it was . . . like in a fight, or something. But I don’t think I could do it the way Peter does it. Cold.”

“For one thing,” Talia says, “don’t let my brother fool you. Over the long stretch of his being my Left Hand, he’s probably only killed four or five people. So it isn’t like you constantly need to go out and murder people. But that doesn’t change my answer, Stiles. You don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to do. I will tattoo that on Peter’s forehead if I have to.”

Stiles can’t help but smile a little at that. “Okay. I . . . okay. Thanks.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that, Stiles.” Talia squeezes his shoulder. “Just think about that, okay?” she says, and he nods. “Now why don’t you go get some sleep? And don’t worry too much about Peter. I think he’s going to be okay. For the first time since the fire . . . I really do think that.”

Stiles nods. “Okay,” he says. He takes his tea and heads back up the stairs. He looks at the files for several long minutes before he yawns and closes them. He can work on them in the morning. He strips down to his underwear and crawls into bed besides Derek, listening to his mate breathe until he falls asleep.

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Chapter End Notes

.....am I the only one suddenly shipping Sheriff Stilinski and Peter together? What the heck! I didn't intend for that to happen!
After a couple weeks, Stiles is really starting to dislike how tired Isaac always looks. He’ll sit at the kitchen table doing their homework and start to nod off. Any time they decide to watch a movie or television, he almost immediately curls up with his head just barely resting against Cora’s shoulder and passes out.

Stiles has gathered by this point that his father and Talia had had a chat with Mr. Lahey. He’s guessing that the abuse hasn’t stopped, but has just shifted into less obvious things. He knows that sleep deprivation is a valid torture method that’s been used in the past.

When he mentions this to Talia, her jaw tightens like she isn’t at all surprised. She says, “I told him he could sleep here whenever he wanted, but he said he thought he had better not.”

Stiles thinks about this, then says brightly, “Hey, I was thinking about having a slumber party this Friday. Would that be okay?”

Talia’s jaw twitches into a smile. “I think that sounds like fun, Stiles.”

Stiles talks to Scott about it, and is greeted with Scott’s boundless enthusiasm. They invite Boyd and Danny. Allison invites Erica and Heather. So it’s just a party. Nothing aimed at Isaac specifically. Stiles buys a billion gallons of soda and bags of chips and then says to Isaac on Wednesday, “Oh, hey, so. Party this Friday. You should stay the night. A whole bunch of people are going to come over.”

“What’s the occasion?” Isaac asks, mulling this over.

“Soda was on sale. And I thought it might cheer Cora up, you know, to have some of her girlfriends over.”

Isaac looks a little suspicious, but apparently thinks twice about asking more questions. “Yeah, okay,” he says.

So when Stiles picks him up from school on Friday, he’s got a backpack with a change of clothes in it. Stiles says most of the party-goers won’t be showing up until the evening, but Isaac didn’t want to go home in between. They do their usual afternoon homework, even though it’s Friday – Stiles says he always likes to get it done while things are fresh in his mind – and around four thirty, he starts dumping bags of chips into bowls and ordering pizza and putting on loud music.

Laura and Jonathan have taken the kids over to Jonathan’s parents’ house for the night. Stiles thinks that Talia and Aaron are going to be home, but he’s betting that they’ll make themselves scarce. He has no idea where Peter is. He hasn’t seen him for days, although they’ve texted back and forth several times. In a way, this is comforting, a return to the way Peter wanders in and out like a ghost, rather than actively avoiding him.
As parties go, he thinks it’s fairly normal. He’s sure that there are teenagers who get drunk and grind and trash things at parties, but he’s never been one of them. Instead there’s pizza and soda and they play touch-football in the huge backyard, blast loud music, have a water balloon battle. Then they troop inside and crash in the living room to play video games.

The girls decide to do makeovers when they switch from Assassin’s Creed to Call of Duty, and go up to Cora’s room. The guys continue to eat chips and egg each other on and play games. After a while they turn those off and are just shooting the shit. Danny’s just broken up with his boyfriend and he’s bemoaning his current celibacy. Stiles and Scott are both laughing at him. Boyd is talking about maybe making it official with Erica before the Ceremonies next year, because he’s sick of going and they’ve known they were mates since they were six years old.

“How are things going with Cora?” Danny asks Isaac, who looks like he wants to retreat into his shell like a turtle. Stiles knows he was asleep for at least two hours while they all played video games, but let him be.

“Good,” Isaac says.

“Just ‘good’?” Scott teases.

“Nobody asked you, McCall,” Isaac says, punching him in the shoulder.

“Well, how was your date, didn’t you two do something lame like roller-skating last weekend?” Boyd asks.

“Cora likes roller-skating,” Isaac says defensively. “And the date was fine. It was fun.”

“C’mon, man, we want details,” Danny says. Stiles looks between them and thinks about intervening, but decides against it. He wants to see how Isaac will handle this. Besides, historically, Isaac doesn’t seem to be a big fan when he intervenes. He’s pretty sure Isaac thinks he’s nosy and pushy. To be fair, Isaac is one hundred percent correct.

Of course, Stiles isn’t quite sure what Boyd thinks about Seth’s abrupt departure and Isaac’s introduction. He seems to like Isaac, and Stiles doesn’t think that he ever met Seth. If he has questions about it – and Stiles is sure that he does – he’s kept them to himself. Same with Erica and Heather, who aren’t in the know.

“There are no details,” Isaac says.

“Just tell us if you’ve kissed,” Scott says, and Isaac glares at him. “No? Really?”

“It’s not . . . it’s not that easy,” Isaac says.

“No, I totally get it,” Scott says. “Your first kiss is a big deal. You like, build it up in your mind and you get almost afraid to do it. You’re always thinking ‘what if this isn’t the right moment’.”

Isaac glances at him, then looks away. “Yeah.”

“Then you should do it now!” Stiles says, and Isaac blinks at him. “I’m serious. Just a quick peck on the lips. That’ll take the pressure off. So it won’t be such a big deal next time.”

“Well . . .” Isaac hesitates. “Maybe if Cora’s okay with it.”

“Let’s go find out!” Scott jumps off the sofa and jogs up the stairs. Isaac looks like he’s contemplating jumping off a cliff, but Scott comes back before he can figure out how to make a
strategic retreat. Cora is behind him, her hair done up in a series of twisted braids, wearing a loose T-shirt and boxer shorts. Allison is behind her with an arm around her shoulders.

“You don’t have to – ” Isaac blurts out as soon as he sees her.

Cora flushes pink. “No, I think – I think Stiles is right. Let’s try it.”

“Oh . . . okay.” Isaac scowls at the others. “Don’t stare. You’re creepy,” he says, and they all immediately find interesting walls or ceilings to look at. He clears his throat and says, “Okay, uh . . .” and then decides to stop talking. Talking seems like a bad idea. He leans down, making sure to move slowly in case Cora changes her mind. She stares up at him for a long moment and then closes her eyes.

His lips bump hers and they both twitch, startled. Isaac feels like an electric shock went through him. But it’s done, he did it. Their first kiss wasn’t much to write home about. He thinks their second one should be better. Cora’s not pulling away, so he leans in again. They do better this time, not pulling away quite as quickly. Kissing is nice, he decides. Cora tilts her head a little and his nose bumps against hers and they both giggle a little, nervous, but they get themselves sorted out.

Isaac puts his hand on Cora’s cheek and tangles his fingers in her hair, and she leans in to him. A minute later, Derek clears his throat. Both Isaac and Cora hastily leap away from each other, turning pink. “Now that you’ve made it through your first dozen kisses,” Derek says, his voice dryly amused, “do you feel better about it?”

“Uh, yeah,” Isaac says. He looks at Cora. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says. She giggles and then scampers away.

“She ran away,” Isaac says, looking forlorn.

“She’s gone to tell all her girlfriends what an amazing kisser you are,” Scott says, grinning. Isaac gives him a suspicious look. “I’m serious, bro. Trust me. That was the face of a very happy girl.”

“Well.” Isaac rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “That’s okay then.”

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It takes Stiles three weeks of research to find any connection between the WLO and the facility in Toledo that Leo Stewart had been investigating before his disappearance. He’s lucky that he has his father backing him up, because he never would have gotten anywhere without him. He has to pull criminal records on some of the WLO who have been arrested, search for known associates, pull old financial information.

Then he finds it, the one piece that makes everything fall into place. A WLO member who had lived in Toledo for six months prior to the massacre at the hospital, and who could be placed in Chicago at that time. She’s already in prison, because she had been involved in some of the other cases that Stiles had found during his initial investigations. She didn’t talk then and she won’t talk now. But Tom and Stiles trace her movements before her arrest and find out where she was at the time of Leo Stewart’s disappearance, find the storage unit she had rented at the same time. They find the rug inside that has blood on it. Blood and some chemicals.
They might never find Stewart’s body, Tom says, but at least they’re putting the pieces together. As they continue to scour the woman’s financial and phone records, they’ll find the other people she was working with.

Stiles is on a roll and he can’t stop himself, so he starts going through all the information from Gerard’s murder again. All his associates, all his phone calls, his GPS tracking data, his bank records. Somewhere in there, there’s a connection to an alpha werewolf, and he’s going to find it.

It makes sense for the WLO to want to destroy the Searching Ceremonies. The fewer werewolves find their mates, the fewer werewolf babies there will be. If they can shed doubt on the entire process, it will rile up the people who have always believed “the werewolves want to steal our children”. It might not cause a civil war, but it would shake a lot of foundations.

So Stiles can see the WLO supplying the drugs that would render a werewolf pliable. He can Gerard striking up a deal with an alpha werewolf to keep him alive. He just can’t figure out what on earth any alpha would get out of it. An alpha with a grudge against Talia might want to destroy her pack, but any alpha worth their salt would have known that this wouldn’t accomplish that.

He’s just sitting at his computer, deep in thought, when a chat window pops up from the forum. It’s one of the other members who had been doing some research for him. ‘Hey – I found out who hired One Click.’

Stiles practically knocks his laptop off his desk in his haste to respond. Derek, who’s been lounging on his bed while he works, looks up at the sudden spike in his heartrate. ‘Okay, who?’

‘It’s a company called Hammurabi Industries.’

Stiles frowns at his laptop. “Hammurabi Industries,” he mutters under his breath.

“Hammurabi was a Babylonian king,” Derek offers.

‘sending you an e-mail,’ his friend says, and Stiles thinks about protesting that e-mail isn’t secure but decides fuck that, he needs this information yesterday.

“And we’re back to Babylon and destruction,” he says, pulling up the e-mail as soon as it appears in his inbox. “Ugh, so many numbers.”

“What are we looking for?” Derek asks, leaning over his shoulder.

“Anything,” Stiles says, scrolling down the list of transactions. “I’m not worried so much about the amounts as where the money was coming from and/or going to. Look, here – that’s two thousand dollars to Seth’s fake father’s account. We’re definitely in the right place.” He keeps scrolling. “It’s used for travel a lot, there’s plane tickets, hotels . . .”

“That name looks familiar,” Derek says, tapping on the screen.

“Yeah, okay, that’s the power company that was supplying electricity to the house in the woods,” Stiles says, nodding. “Look, there’s a payment to an ISP, maybe we can track down their internet or phone records. Jesus, look at all these big withdrawals. What are those, wire transfers?”

“I think so,” Derek says, as Stiles navigates around the account. “Damn, that last one is a half mil. What do you think they are?”

Stiles clicks a few more times and looks at the dates. “If I had to guess from the timing? These are the bribes that were paid out to the police and the DA in Santa Rosa for their help in keeping Peter
in jail. See, these three are the day after Gerard was killed. This one is two days later – that’s probably the DA’s. And then there are two more the day after Sarah made her confession.”

“Jesus, can we prove that?” Derek asks.

“I don’t know. Since they’re all wire transfers, there’s no name on the recipient, and if the cops are smart, they won’t have touched them. I’ll ask my dad. He’ll know what to do with them,” he says, and makes a note of each date and amount before he continues to scroll.


“Shit,” Stiles says, going tense and then scrambling for his phone. “What’s the date on that?”

“January thirty-first,” Derek says.

“The day before the Ceremonies,” Stiles says. “That makes sense, we knew they were in town then.” He taps his phone a couple times. “Dad? Hey! So I obtained a bunch of information illegally and now I need warrants!”

Derek hears Tom groan on the other end of the phone. “Okay. What’d you do?”

“I got their bank account,” Stiles says. “And now I have some hotel information. I need a list of all the guests at the Beacon Hills Marriot on January thirty-first. But I’m pretty sure that they won’t just give me that, so . . .”

“What, like someone just gave you the bank account information?” Tom asks. “I don’t exactly have grounds to request a warrant for that.”

“Just say you got an anonymous tip that, uh, that there was a drug deal that day or something.”

“So you’re asking me to lie.”

“No, I’m asking you not to make me hang up, call the main number, disguise my voice, and leave an anonymous tip about a drug deal at the Marriot.”

Tom sighs. “Son, we’re going to have a serious talk about this later over curly fries,” he says.

“Wait, don’t hang up!” Stiles says. “I’m going to e-mail you some of this stuff. I think I found the bribes that the police in Santa Rosa got.”

“Christ,” Tom says. “Same account?” he asks, and Stiles confirms. “Look, Stiles, we need to do this very carefully if we’re going to stick it to them. I want you to create a new e-mail address and I want you to use someone else’s internet – bring your laptop to a place with free wi-fi. This needs to be submitted absolutely anonymously or it won’t be admissible in court. Okay?”

“You got it,” Stiles says, and then says goodbye and hangs up. “He wants to nail those assholes so bad,” he says.

“I’m not surprised.” Derek is still scrolling through the account. “That’s the only time I see a Beacon Hills hotel,” he says, “but I went to the night that Gerard was murdered to see what was there.”

“A hotel in Santa Rosa?” Stiles asks hopefully.

“No. No hotel at all that night. But a gas station in Ukiah, which is maybe half an hour north of Santa Rosa. Less than six hours before Gerard died.”
“Geez. It’s not exactly ironclad.”

“No, but it’s something.” Derek pushes a hand through his hair and says, “Hammurabi was a Babylonian king who’s famous for the Code of Hammurabi. It’s one of the oldest writings in the world, one of the first sets of actual laws. It’s where we get the phrase ‘an eye for an eye’.”

Stiles’ head jerks around. “Is it?” he says carefully.

Derek nods. “Why?”

“Well,” Stiles says, “that seems pretty coincidental when one of my main suspects is a man who was blinded by the WLO.”

“Jesus,” Derek says.

Stiles lets out a breath. “We need to print all this stuff so I have a working copy. Then we need to sit down with all the records I printed on Deucalion. If they overlap, we’ll find out.”

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Isaac is a little surprised when he gets home after dinner on Thursday to find that his father is nowhere to be seen. Lately, he’s been lurking just inside the door when Isaac shows up. He glances around and takes a moment to put the Tupperware full of leftovers in the refrigerator. He’s wondering if he can get away with darting up to his room and hiding there when his father clomps up from the basement.

“Got a project for you, son,” Lahey says, with a nasty smile, and Isaac winces but goes down the stairs when his father points. Utter chaos greets him. It looks like his father has brought home every piece of equipment from every landscaping business in town and dumped it in the basement. Isaac recognizes a lot of it from the cemetery. Upkeep there isn’t just digging graves; it’s also trimming the grass, pruning the trees, keeping everything neat and orderly.

There are huge piles of shovels, rakes, clippers, gallon barrels of weedkiller or gasoline for the lawnmowers, pipes, cans of paint. It’s all been tossed into the basement with zero regard for order or ease of extraction.

“Decided to finally clean out that shed down at the cemetery,” Lahey says. “Lot of old garbage in there, it seems. Gonna refit it and make it into a little mourner’s parlor, you know, for when they hold the services graveside. Had to do something with all this crap, so down here it went.”

“Oh, Isaac says.

“I want it all cleaned up and organized,” his father says, gesturing. “Label it all and make an inventory.”

Isaac picks up a rusty crowbar. Four other things clang to the floor as if he removed a key Jenga piece. “I’ll get tetanus,” he says.

“You’ve had your shots,” Lahey says scornfully. “Get to work.”

Isaac looks at the enormous piles of tools and trash, looks at his father, and says, “No.”
Lahey folds his arms over his chest. “I beg your pardon?”

“No,” Isaac repeats. “I’m not doing this. As soon as I move one thing, everything else is going to fall. It’s dangerous. You didn’t have to dump it all down here like this. You did it, you clean it up.”

“Now, you know that isn’t the right answer,” Lahey says, his eyes narrowing.

“I don’t care what you think the right answer is.” Isaac knows he should shut up, knows he’s only making things worse for himself, but he can’t. The last few weeks of spending time with the Hale pack have taught him a few things. They’ve taught him that there is a place in the world that he’s safe and cared about. They’ve taught him what a loving family looks like. He’s going to be out of this house and away from this asshole sooner rather than later. There are some things he doesn’t have to put up with anymore. “You can’t hurt me. You know you can’t.” He heads towards the stairs. “I’m leaving.”

“The hell you are,” Lahey says, grabbing him by the wrist. “You’ve got two choices here, boy. Get to work or get in the freezer.”

“No!” Isaac shouts. “I’m not going in there anymore. You can’t make me! You can’t hurt me because there are people looking out for me now, people who are willing to protect me.”

“Is that what you think?” Lahey snarls, pulling him closer and getting a hold of him by the ear. “You think they’re gonna protect you? Where are they now, Isaac? Where are your precious friends now? They can’t do a thing to stop me. You’re gonna get in that freezer if it’s the last thing you do!” He punctuates this statement with a shove in the freezer’s direction. Isaac stumbles backwards, trips over one of the things that had fallen earlier, and sprawls backwards into the pile of tools.

He feels a sharp, intense pain in his gut that only gets worse when he tries to scramble back to his feet. A groan escapes him as he moves. Half the pile has collapsed behind him and he’s braced against – he’s not sure. He thinks it might actually be a coffin, although it might be the wall. He tries again to get up, but can’t move.

“Jesus,” Lahey says, and Isaac looks up at his father. His eyes are wide, and he takes a step backwards, then to the side, like he doesn’t know where to go. “Jesus, Isaac.”

Isaac blinks at his father, then follows his gaze down, to the length of rebar that’s pierced his abdomen and emerged on the other side. “Oh,” he says faintly, touching his stomach just below it, feeling a trickle of blood soak through his shirt.

“Jesus, look what you’ve done,” Lahey swears, pacing back and forth. Isaac thinks about protesting that it’s not his fault, but his father fends that off by continuing, “You just had to refuse, just had to – ”

Since he’s still pacing and clearly not going to be any help, Isaac tries to pull himself together. He knows he can’t take out the rebar, not until he gets to a hospital. He’ll bleed to death within a minute. But if it was instantly fatal, if it had pierced a major artery, he’d probably be unconscious already. He can survive this, if he gets help right away, if he can get the rebar out of the pile of crap without injuring himself further, if he can stay conscious and not slide off the damned thing. He’s at a bad angle for that; gravity wants to take him forward and down, and he’s forced to lean back against the piece of metal, which hurts like hell.

He’s about to voice some of these thoughts when he catches what his father is mumbling. “Jensen’s gonna be buried at nine tomorrow – should work – just make it a little deeper – ”
“What – Dad!” Isaac protests, his voice more of a croak than anything else. He’s seen something like this in a movie, he thinks. It’s a perfect way to dispose of a body. Find an open grave, dump the body in, shovel some dirt on top of it. The next day, the coffin is placed on top and everything’s covered over. Nobody even thinks to look. “Dad, I can’t –”

“You – you just –” Lahey says, pushing both hands through his hair. “God dammit, Isaac, if you hadn’t – just stay – don’t – don’t go –” And then he storms out of the basement, leaving Isaac alone.

Isaac stares after him for a long minute, feeling lost and bereft. He can feel tears starting, and he just half-stands, half-crouches with a piece of metal in his stomach and his legs already starting to burn, thinking about how his father isn’t going to help him, his father isn’t even going to try to save him, all his father is thinking about is how he’s going to avoid going to jail for this.

It would be easy to give in to that, to just let it happen. He’ll be dead or at least unconscious by the time his father gets back, especially if he decides to dig the grave out a little more. That will take a while. And what else can he do? He could scream for help, but nobody will hear him.

Then he remembers the phone Stiles had given him. His father had no idea he has it, would never have thought to take it away from him.

“Okay, Lahey,” he says under his breath. The pain is bad, but he’s dealt with worse. “Get your shit together. Just – easy now –” He moves slow, reaches back behind himself, pulls the phone out of his pocket. His hand is bloody from where he had pressed it against his stomach, and it takes three tries for ‘slide to unlock’ to actually work.

He wants to call Cora, wants desperately to hear her voice, but he needs help now, so he dials 911. A professional sounding woman picks up and he blurts out, “I need an ambulance.”

“Okay, what is your name and address?” she asks, and Isaac rattles it off. “Can you tell me about your injuries?”

“I – I fell,” Isaac says. “There’s some piece of metal that’s stabbing me. I’m not bleeding a lot but I can’t take it out because then I think I’d bleed to death.”

“Okay, Isaac, help is on the way,” she says, still sounding calm and smooth. “Is there anyone with you?”

“No, I – I’m – ah!” Isaac’s leg is starting to cramp. He grits his teeth and tries to reposition himself, and pain lances through his gut. “I’m alone,” he coughs out. His vision is starting to go red and distant, fading in and out with the beat of his pulse. “I don’t know – how much longer I can stay on my feet.”

“Take it easy, Isaac,” the operator says. “Is there something you can lean on?”

“I’m afraid to move,” he replies. “The whole pile might collapse and then – nnngh!” He bites down on his lip as another spike of pain goes through him. Every time he moves as much as a millimeter, he can feel the metal sliding through him, scraping against things that he’s pretty sure aren’t supposed to be scraped. “Please help,” he says, and he knows the operator is talking but he can’t really hear her anymore. “Please, I can’t – I can’t leave Cora. She needs me. She’s been hurt so much. I can’t leave her.”

The operator’s voice fades back in. “– your girlfriend?”

There’s a moment of startled silence. “Isaac, are you in a werewolf pack? This is important. We need to notify your alpha.”


“Okay, we’re going to call her. Have you . . .” the woman says, but her voice is distant again, like it’s coming through a hundred miles of water, and the phone falls out of Isaac’s hand before she can finish her sentence.

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Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Warnings for some violence, I suppose...? And for me making stuff up about werewolves. =D

It’s a typical Thursday evening at the Hale house. Scott and Stiles are playing video games. Stiles can’t do anything with any of his cases while he’s waiting for people to supply him with more information, so he’s taking an evening off. He had made lemon chicken in the crockpot, and everyone ate themselves silly. Tyler is doing a puzzle while Sylvia toddles around getting into everything. Derek is sitting next to Stiles on the sofa, reading, while he absently rubs a hand in circles on Stiles’ back. Talia and Aaron are on the loveseat across the room, far enough from the television that they can have a quiet conversation.

Cora comes downstairs slowly, one hand pressed into her stomach, her movements stiff and awkward. The scent of pain and distress comes from her, and everyone looks up. “Are you okay, honey?” Talia asks, already on her feet.

“My stomach hurts,” Cora says, her voice thin and strained.

Stiles looks at Derek, alarmed. As far as he knows, werewolves don’t get natural illnesses, so if Cora’s in pain, something is really wrong. Talia makes Cora move her hands so she can lift up her shirt to check for an injury. “I don’t see anything wrong,” she says, cautiously pressing down on the same spot. “When did it start?”

“Just a few minutes ago,” Cora says. “It feels like I’m being stabbed or something.”

Scott has paused the video game and everyone is clustering around her. Stiles says, “There wasn’t anything in the food that we haven’t all eaten a hundred times.”

“I doubt it’s any kind of poison,” Talia says. “Most of them give off a specific scent that werewolves can detect.” She presses a hand against Cora’s forehead. “No fever. Do you hurt anywhere else?”

“No, just there,” Cora says. “And I wasn’t doing anything, either. I was just lying on my bed, watching TV.”

“I’m going to call Alan,” Talia says, getting out her phone. Stiles forces himself to take a few steps back so he’s not crowding her. The living room is suddenly full of people. Cora is looking pale but coherent, leaning against Derek while he helps her sit down on the sofa. Stiles takes out his phone, but he doesn’t even know what to Google. He wishes Peter were there, but he hasn’t seen him in a couple days. He feels frustrated, helpless. Scott squeezes his shoulder, sensing his distress.

“Is it getting any worse?” Derek quietly asks Cora, sitting down next to her and squeezing her hand.

“No,” she says, pressing her hand back into her stomach. “Oooh. I thought maybe I had pulled a
Derek looks up at where his mother is talking to Dr. Deaton. “– just a few minutes ago, she says. No, there’s no visible injury.” A pause. “I don’t think so . . . no, I don’t . . . well, I can check for that but I – oh, Jesus, I’m getting another call. Hang on – ” She pulls the phone away from her ear, glances at it to see who’s calling, and then frowns and taps the screen. “Tom, can this wait? I – what?” she says, and Stiles sees the spine of every werewolf in the room go rigid. “Where? I’ll be there in ten minutes.” She taps the phone again and says crisply to Deaton, “Sympathetic pain from her mate. I have to go.” And then she hangs up.

“What the fuck?” Stiles blurs out. Derek’s already on his feet.

“Derek, bring your sister,” Talia says, heading for the door half-running.

Stiles sure as hell isn’t about to be left behind. He’s never heard of ‘sympathetic pain’ before, but the concept seems pretty easy to understand even if he couldn’t hear the other half of Talia’s conversation like the werewolves. He has to really run to keep up with Talia’s jog, but fortunately the car isn’t far away. Derek drops Cora in the front seat and then gets into the back. Stiles dives in next to him.

“What’s wrong, is Isaac hurt?” he demands, trying to catch his breath.

“Yeah,” Derek says quietly. “And if paramedics decided to call his alpha, it must be bad.”

Cora’s pressing both her hands against her stomach and trying to stay calm. “Isaac,” she whimpers. “Did they say what’s wrong?”

“No, honey, just that – that he was hurt,” Talia says, her hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel as the car bounces down the road. “Paramedics were on their way; we’re going to meet them at the hospital. Stiles, your father is going to meet us there too.”

“Is there a reason for the police to be involved?” Derek asks, his voice tight and unhappy.

“I don’t know, Derek,” Talia says. “But it went through official channels, so the police is who called me.”

Cora whimpers and doubles over, and Derek lets out a wolf whine like he can’t help himself, leaning over her and rubbing at her back. Stiles squeezes his wrist, wishing there was something he could do to help. They’re in the car, and there isn’t anything helpful to do, so he takes out his phone and calls his father. “Dad, what happened?” he demands. “Talia didn’t stop to get details, give me the details!”

“Stiles, I don’t know any more than you do at this point,” Tom says. There’s a note of anxiety in his voice, despite his efforts to control it. “I’m going to meet you at the hospital.”

“But you have to know something, I mean, emergency services called you, so – ”

“Stiles,” Tom says, “I’ll meet you at the hospital.” He hangs up without another word, and Stiles strangles back a scream of frustration. He’s on the verge of hyperventilating by the time Talia gets the car onto the main road.

“God, is this what it was like for you guys last summer?” he asks, pressing a hand against the scar the bullet left in his chest. He can’t imagine what that must have been like, their frantic race to the hospital with Derek, Stiles, and Peter all in the back of ambulances.
“Kinda yeah,” Cora says, rubbing her hands up and down her arms as if cold. Talia says nothing but drives even faster. Stiles closes his eyes and focuses on keeping his breathing calm and even. He can feel himself edging towards a panic attack, and he knows that now really isn’t the time.

They make the drive to the hospital in twelve minutes, which is a lot faster than he thinks should be possible. Melissa is waiting for them just inside the door to the emergency room, and she grabs Talia by the forearm and says, “This way.” Derek is still supporting Cora. Stiles has gathered that Talia brought Cora along because it would have taken too much effort to leave her behind. In fact, she’s charging ahead of Talia now, following her instincts down the hallway to where Isaac is lying on a gurney parked at the side of a double-wide hallway.

“Jesus Christ,” Stiles gasps out, despite himself. He can see the length of rebar protruding from Isaac’s stomach. Melissa looks at him sharply, as if just realizing that he’s there and thinking about telling him that he shouldn’t be. Stiles is fairly sure that if anyone had time, they’d be lecturing him for following without being invited. But Isaac is his friend. He’s the one who got Isaac into this, who dragged Isaac over to the Hale house. If Isaac was hurt by his father, that’s his fault, too. He’s the one who told Tom about Isaac’s father being abusive.

Cora lets out a sob and skids over to Isaac’s side, grabbing his hand. “Isaac, Isaac, it’s me,” she says.

Amazingly, Isaac is conscious. He rasps out, “Hey,” but can’t manage more than that.

“Please don’t leave me,” Cora says.

“Won’t,” he says, eyes fluttering closed.

Talia’s been having a quiet, hushed discussion with Melissa and a doctor. Then she nods and takes a few steps towards Isaac. Derek takes Cora by the shoulders and gently pulls her back. Talia takes her place at Isaac’s side, leaning over him. “Isaac,” she says, her voice even, “they’re going to take you into surgery in a minute. They’re going to do everything they can. But they say there’s only about a fifty-fifty percent chance you’ll survive that being taken out of you. Do you want me to give you the bite? It’ll improve your chances.”

Isaac nods and squeezes her hand. “I can’t leave Cora,” he says. The words are only barely out of his mouth when Talia’s teeth sink down into his wrist. Isaac makes a strangled noise between gritted teeth. Talia lays his wrist back down gently, and moments later the doctors have whisked him away. Cora’s left sitting on the floor with Derek’s arm around her, crying helplessly.

“He can’t die,” she says to Derek. “He can’t, he can’t, I won’t be able to – I’ll go crazy, I won’t have – nothing in the world would matter after that.”

“Shh, I know,” Derek murmurs, smoothing her hair down. “They’re going to do everything they can. Isaac’s strong, he can do this.”

Stiles starts to pace around the hallway. “How long – does the bite take right away?” he asks.

Derek shakes his head a little. “It takes an hour or more for the healing abilities to start to kick in. But if they can keep him alive that long . . .”

Talia turns to Melissa and says smoothly, “We’ll give blood. He’s going to need it.”

Melissa nods and turns to grab an aide. Two minutes later, Stiles is sitting down next to Derek watching a phlebotomist insert a tube into his arm. She turns to him when she’s done and asks, “Were you going to donate, too?”
“He’s not a wolf,” Derek tells her.

“I’ll still donate,” Stiles says, and she shakes her head a little. He frowns and says, “Does it matter?”

“Well, werewolves are all universal donors and/or recipients amongst themselves,” Derek explains, picking up a box of tissues and handing it to Cora, who’s sniffling in the chair next to him. “Any werewolf can donate to any other werewolf. Whereas if you were going to donate to Isaac, you would have to match blood type and everything. Plus they can’t take your blood unless you’ve been screened for blood diseases, et cetera.”

“Right, right.” Stiles pushes both hands through his hair and taps his feet up and down, thinking about how much he’d like to be pacing.

Talia, who’s sitting across from him in the small room they were ushered into, looks up and says, “When a member of the pack is injured, it’s customary for other werewolves to donate their blood. Particularly the alpha. Our blood helps the other wolf heal.”

“Pluripotents?” Stiles suggests, and Talia looks at him blankly. “Stem cells. One of the ongoing scientific theories is that werewolves heal because they continuously generate stem cells. Uh, so, in theory donating werewolf blood to someone who isn’t a werewolf would help them heal. If they didn’t reject it, anyway. It’s from the Latin. Pluri, meaning many, and – Dad!”

Stiles shoots out of his chair as Tom comes in, still dressed in his full uniform. He gives Talia a quick nod and then embraces his son. “Here’s what we know,” he says, tousling Stiles’ hair. “Isaac called 911 at 6:43 PM and said that he needed an ambulance. Said he had fallen and had a piece of metal embedded in his body. A minute later he mentioned Cora, his mate, and when the operator asked, confirmed that he was part of a pack and that Talia was his alpha. Dispatch called me, I called you.”

“That rebar had gone all the way through him,” Talia says. “I don’t know that it could have happened by accident.”

“My guys at the scene said that there was a lot of old equipment in the basement. Shovels, piping, that sort of thing. So it’s possible he might have just tripped and fallen. His father wasn’t in the house and his car wasn’t there. A couple guys have gone down to the cemetery to see if he’s at work.”

“Jesus,” Stiles says. “Normally if you found a guy digging a grave after you find someone grievously injured in their home, that would be a sure sign that he’s guilty. But when they dig graves for a living, it’s a little more complicated.”

Tom nods. “We won’t know what happened until Isaac wakes up enough to tell us. The EMTs tried to ask him a couple questions in the ambulance, but he kept lapsing in and out of consciousness. And frankly, they had better things to do.”

“It doesn’t make any sense, though,” Talia says, her voice tight and angry. “If he had fallen, he would have fallen forward onto the rebar. Not backwards onto it.”

“We don’t have all the facts,” Tom says, “and so we’re not going to jump to any conclusions.” His gaze flickers to Cora, and Talia gives a little nod. She’s huddled up into a little ball. Right now she’s focused on her fear and her pain, but if rage takes over, there might not be any stopping her.

Desperate for distraction, Stiles says, “So what’s this sympathetic pain thing? Does that normally
happen? I mean, Derek hasn’t had any problems when I’ve managed to hurt myself tripping over my own feet or anything.”

Talia glances at him, and she seems glad of the change of subject. “It’s very rare, and nobody’s sure of what causes it. There’s a lot of different theories regarding the circumstances under which the mating bond forms. Some people think it’s because of trauma. But other people think it’s completely random. Nobody’s really sure.”

“That’s pretty interesting,” Stiles says.

Tom sits down on one of the benches and pulls Stiles down next to him before he can start pacing. “So,” he says, “your warrants came through.”

“Oh my God!” Stiles says, shooting out of the chair his father had just put him in.

“It’s not as conclusive as you might like,” Tom says. “The guest that used that particular account to check into the Marriott the night before the Searching Ceremonies was our elusive Jack Babylon.”

“Shit,” Stiles says, pacing. “I guess there wouldn’t be any reason for the alpha to have been there that day. He wouldn’t have been specifically needed.” He frowns a little and then says, ‘But that’s not conclusive at all. You said it wasn’t as conclusive ‘as I might like’.”

“That isn’t the only warrant I got, remember?” Tom asks, and Stiles’ eyes lit up. “Those wire transfers opened up five accounts. They’re all numbered, no names attached. All but one of our cops in Santa Rosa was smart enough not to touch that money. But the fifth has a bit of an online gambling problem, it seems, and he needed that money sooner rather than later. And I will bet any of you a year’s salary that I can get him to roll on his conspirators with a little bit of pressure.”

“Awesome,” Stiles breathes out.

“Do you think he’ll be able to give us any information outside the police in Santa Rosa?” Talia asks, with a tiny bit of red in her eyes.

“Him? No. He’s a low-level player. Probably got the bribe for misfiling or planting some evidence. It’s the smallest amount, and I doubt he ever met Jack Babylon, let alone anyone else involved. But the lead detective and the DA, I’m willing to bet, both did. And they might be willing to roll on him, in turn, if it can keep their asses out of the fire.” Sheriff Stilinski stretches and pops his shoulders. “I’m waiting for a little bit more bank information, but I should be able to move on them next week.”

“Hopefully this,” Talia says, giving a gesture that encompasses the hospital, “won’t slow you down too much.”

Tom’s eyes glint and then he lets out a breath. “No. I’m going to let one of my deputies handle this, to avoid the appearance of bias. I’m part of this pack and so is Isaac. I won’t be involved.”

Talia nods a little and leans against the wall. The minutes slowly trickle by while all of them wait for news. Every minute that they don’t hear something is a good minute. It means Isaac is still breathing, and one minute closer to the healing powers from the Bite kicking in.

It’s been about forty minutes, and Talia is giving her third pint of blood, when the door to the room bursts open and Roger Lahey comes storming in. “Where’s my son?” he demands. One of Sheriff Stilinski’s deputies is behind him, a smartass that Stiles likes a lot named Parrish. He looks at Tom and gives him a slight nod. Stiles wonders what that’s about, but he’s pretty sure he’s going to find out in short order.
Talia is already on her feet. It’s difficult to look imposing when one is attached to an IV pole, but she manages it. “Mr. Lahey, lower your voice. This is a hospital.”

“Tell me what you’ve done with my son and I’ll lower my voice,” he retorts.

“Your son is in surgery,” Tom says, getting to his feet. “He took a nasty spill. We’re waiting to hear how he’s doing. You’re welcome to join us.”

“The hell I will,” Lahey snaps. Stiles can feel Derek tensing beside him. He glances over at Cora, sees her fists clenched in her lap, trembling. Her eyes are pure gold. Derek reaches out and takes one of her hands, gently uncurling the fist. “I want to talk to his doctor, do you hear me? I don’t trust anything that comes out of your mouth. Who knows what you animals did to him that you might try to cover up afterwards – ”

Cora’s lip curls into a snarl. So does Talia’s, but she controls it better, keeps herself from making any sound. “The only thing I did to your son, sir, is try to save his life. Now he is in surgery and his doctors are busy. You can either sit here with us or sit elsewhere, but either way, you are going to have to wait.”

“What do you mean, you – you – did you fucking bite my son?” Lahey asks, getting in Talia’s face. “Did you turn my son into a God damned werewolf?”

“Yes,” Talia says simply. She glances at Tom. He’s studying something on his phone.

“You can’t do that! I – I’ll – that’s assault, I could have you arrested!”

“I asked Isaac. He was conscious. He gave his consent.”

“He’s a minor, and I made it abundantly clear to you that I didn’t want him in your pack! You had no God damned right!”

“Actually, legally, I absolutely had a right,” Talia says. Her voice has gone cold and unyielding. “The Alpha Good Samaritan Act of 1997 – which I helped write, by the way – states that in the case of a minor with no parent available – you could not be reached by telephone – with a life-threatening injury – life-threatening defined by a fifty-percent or less chance of survival even with immediate medical care, as agreed upon by two doctors – an alpha can give that child the bite without fear of legal repercussions unless paperwork has previously been filed with the treating hospital stating that this is not to be done. There was no such paperwork on file; therefore, I was entirely within my rights to give your son the Bite.

“Furthermore,” Talia continues, going even more icy in contrast to Lahey’s heated sputtering, “I find it appalling that you’re screaming at me for saving your son’s life after you nearly killed him.”

“You – you can’t – how dare you accuse me of – it’s not my fault my kid is a God damned klutz! What kind of idiot manages to fall on a pile of crap and get himself impaled?!”

Tom looks over at this, and a hard, angry smile touches his face. “That was what I needed to hear,” he says, and steps over, taking out his handcuffs. “Roger Lahey, you are under arrest for the attempted murder of your son, Isaac Lahey.”

“You don’t – ”

“Yes, I do,” Tom says. “I specifically told Deputy Parrish not to give you any details about Isaac’s injuries, and all I told you a few minutes ago was that he had ‘taken a nasty spill’. You seem to know exactly what his injuries are, which means at the very least, you were there when it happened
and left him to die. That’s enough for me to take you into custody. I’m sure Isaac’s statement once he’s recovered will give me everything else I need to know.”

“He – he just fell, it wasn’t my fault! If he says anything else, he’s lying to, to get back at me – ”

It looks like Lahey might keep talking, but then there’s a high-pitched howl and Cora leaps out of her chair, throwing herself towards the other man. Derek swears and grabs her around the waist, but it makes no difference. He’s dragged right along with her. The IV pole crashes to the ground as Talia moves to intercept her.

“Kyle, get Lahey out of here,” Tom says, and Deputy Parrish nods, grabbing the man by the elbow and hauling him from the room. Lahey is still shouting about how he didn’t have anything to do with Isaac’s injuries, but nobody is listening. Talia and Derek wrestle Cora to the ground as she howls and thrashes and tries to get free.

“Cora, calm down,” Talia says, and even though it’s in her alpha voice and her eyes flare red, it makes no difference to the teenager. She’s still screaming and trying to launch herself in Lahey’s direction. Stiles grabs the bag of blood from the IV pole before it can leak all over the floor. Talia gets Cora into a headlock and pins her to the floor, her cheek pressed into the tile. “Cora, listen to me, if you don’t calm down you’ll have to leave the hospital. Is that what you want? To leave Isaac alone?”

Cora’s screams turn to sobs, and she goes limp against the floor. Talia shushes her and smoothes down her hair, curls up around her. Derek stays with them as well, rubbing slow circles in Cora’s back.

Stiles feels tears stinging at his eyes as he watches them. He turns to his father and says, miserably, “This is my fault. If I hadn’t said – ”

“Absolutely not,” Tom replies firmly. “This had nothing to do with you, Stiles. We don’t know exactly what happened. Maybe it even was an accident. I doubt Isaac’s dad was actually trying to kill him. But regardless of what happened today, this wasn’t your fault. You did absolutely the right thing telling me.”

“Why wouldn’t he just leave?” Stiles asks, though he’s not really expecting an answer. “Why wouldn’t he just come stay with us?”

Derek looks up from where he’s sitting on the floor with his sister. “Why wouldn’t you just believe me, when I said you were my mate? It comes from the same place. That feeling of . . . not being good enough.”

“It’s stupid,” Stiles says, scowling. “It was stupid then and it’s stupid now.”

Tom shakes his head a little. “Human nature can be funny. That’s the truth.”

Stiles tries to sit down. He manages it for about forty-five seconds before he’s back on his feet. “I’m going to go get us some sodas,” he says, and trots out of the little room. He finds a vending machine, which promptly eats his money. He scowls at it and shakes it, then remembers some stupid statistic about how many people are killed by vending machines in a year, and decides to try the cafeteria instead.

It’s probably a better idea, anyway. The cafeteria has coffee. He gets some for himself, his father, and Talia. Then hot tea for Derek and cocoa for Cora. By the time he gets back up to the room, Cora has calmed down some. She’s still crying a little, but they’ve gotten her back into a chair.
Laura’s there now, sitting next to her sister and patting her head like a child. “Sorry, I didn’t get you anything,” Stiles says, giving Cora the cocoa. She accepts it with trembling hands.

“It’s fine, I’ll steal some of Derek’s,” she says, and her brother scowls at her. Cora gives a wobbly smile at this.

“It’s good that we haven’t heard anything yet, right?” Stiles says. “I mean, the longer they can keep him alive, the more likely it is that the werewolf healing will kick in.”

“That’s true,” Talia says, nodding.

“Okay,” Stiles says, and continues to pace. His father starts to pull him into a chair again, but then seems to think better of the idea. Stiles will feel better if he continues to move, so he does. He swings by Derek a couple times and sits with him for a few minutes, nestling his head into the crook of the older man’s shoulder, but it’s never very long before he’s up and moving again.

It’s been nearly two hours before the doctor comes in. “Okay, Isaac’s out of surgery,” he says, and Cora makes a little whining noise. “He’s in stable condition. He’s lost a lot of blood, but his pulse is steady, respiration is good. We’re going to get him settled and then – ”

“When can I see him?” Cora bursts out, unable to help it.

“Probably in a couple hours,” the doctor says. “It’ll depend some on his condition. Okay?”

Talia nods and puts an arm around Cora’s shoulders. “Thank you, doctor.” She lets out a breath as he walks away. “I suppose telling the rest of you to go home would fall on deaf ears.”

“Actually . . .” Stiles scrubs both hands through his hair. “I don’t know if there’s much point to me sticking around. And I want to talk to Peter about the stuff we found out, so . . . maybe I’ll head home.”

Derek looks between Cora and Stiles for a few moments of indecision. Cora manages a wan smile for him and says, “I’ll be okay, Derek. Mom and Laura can stay with me.”

“Are you sure?” Derek asks her, and she nods. “Okay,” he says, and leans down to kiss her on the forehead. Then he wraps an arm around Stiles’ waist and they start out of the hospital. “So how much of you being willing to leave is you not wanting to face Isaac when he wakes up because you still feel guilty about what happened to him?”

“Uh . . . twenty . . . three percent,” Stiles says.

Derek sighs but doesn’t argue with him, leaning over to kiss his hair. “Was there something specific you wanted to ask Peter?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Stiles climbs into the passenger seat and rests his head against it. He’s quiet for a few minutes. “But I was just thinking about what Cora said. About how nuts she would go if she lost Isaac. I feel the same way, I mean, I don’t know how I would react if anything happened to you, but it wouldn’t be pretty, you know? I’d lose my shit. The same way Peter lost his. I mean, I love Uncle P, but he’s always going to be crazy.”

“Yeah,” Derek agrees. “I’d be the same way.”

“So . . . why is Deucalion sane?” Stiles asks. “I mean, by all rights he should be off his rocker. And I was thinking . . . maybe he is. Maybe he’s just better at hiding it than others. And that’s a motive that I hadn’t considered. That sometimes crazy people do crazy shit just because it’s crazy.”
Derek nods a little. “That makes about as much sense as anything else I’ve heard,” he says.

Peter’s on the back porch when they get home. Stiles gets them all a drink and joins him there. Derek trails out behind him. Stiles gives Peter a brief summary of when he’s been thinking so far. “It’s like, we’ve got all this circumstantial evidence, but we don’t have proof,” he says, “and I know that we can’t move ahead without that. This isn’t like Kate Argent or even like Seth. I mean, Duke is an alpha, he’s well-known, we can’t just . . . but I think I might have an idea, but I didn’t want to go ahead with it until I had talked to you.”

Peter nods and gestures for him to go ahead.

“So, remember how I said I thought the witch’s voice was familiar?” Stiles asks. “What if it was Duke’s wife, Marin? We know she’s a Druid, and she must be a powerful one if her coven decided to marry her off to an alpha for an alliance. I had heard her voice before, but not often enough that I would have recognized it instantly.”

“A sensible enough theory,” Peter says.

“So . . . maybe I should call and try to talk to her,” Stiles says. “I mean, I could tell Duke I needed to ask some questions about witches and spells and stuff.”

Peter tilts his head to one side, considering. “It’s risky,” he says. “It could tip him off.”

“Yeah. That’s why I didn’t want to do it until I had talked to you.”

“Do you actually have questions that you could ask her?” Peter asks.

“I could probably come up with something, but . . .”

“But she would wonder why you hadn’t just asked Dr. Deaton, or one of your friends through the WLO victim support group,” Peter says, and Stiles sighs and nods. “Do any of the cases Duke’s given you have any ties to the Druidic community?”

“Not really,” Stiles says.

Derek leans against the railing and says, “Why don’t you ask about this case?” he asks, and the others blink at him. “Look, we don’t want him suspicious. What would make him more likely to trust us? Coming up with details about some random case? Or asking him questions specifically about this? We would never go to him as a resource if we thought he was involved.”

“Derek,” Peter says, eyebrows raised, “I think perhaps I’ve underestimated you.”

Derek scowls at him. “Maybe, maybe not. It’s because I’m too straightforward that I thought of it. But Stiles is, well, he’s new at this. He might make a mistake and trust someone outside his pack, without it being a cause for suspicion.”

Peter nods slowly. “Yes, I think we could make that work.”

They debate different strategies for a little while. Stiles winds up writing up half of a script, different questions he can ask, so he doesn’t panic and reveal too much. Then Peter stops him. “You’re too nervous,” he says. “You’re going to give yourself away with the tone of your voice.”

“Uh, I don’t think there’s a way for me to not be nervous about this,” Stiles says, but he knows Peter’s right. He’s practically hyperventilating.
“Mm.” Peter goes into the house without another word. Stiles blinks after him, but doesn’t protest. Derek rubs his shoulders but stays quiet. Peter comes back a minute later with a small bottle. He shakes out a pill and hands it to Stiles with a bottle of water. “Xanax,” he says, “It’ll calm your nerves.”

“Why do you even have this?” Stiles asks.

Peter shrugs. “I have all sorts of things handy that you probably don’t want to know about.”

That’s undoubtedly true. Stiles takes the little pill and then starts to pace. Derek draws him into his lap and kisses him, and it gets a little involved and he almost forgets about what’s going on. He does have to admit that he winds up a great deal calmer. At least Deucalion won’t be able to hear his heartbeat over the phone.

They play the recording of Cora and the witch several times to familiarize themselves with her voice. Stiles’ phone can’t make calls and record at the same time, so he’s got it on speaker while Peter’s phone records. After several deep breaths, he pulls Deucalion up in his memory and dials. The alpha picks up on the third ring. “Hey, Duke, it’s Stiles,” he says. “I had kind of a weird question or two.”

“From you, I would expect no less,” Deucalion says, sounding amused.

“It’s actually about magic stuff. Your wife is a Druid, right? Any chance she’s around for me to talk to?”

“Let me see . . .” Deucalion’s voice is raised, but a little away from the phone. “Marin? Do you have a second?”

A few moments later, a muffled comment or two, and then a woman’s voice says smoothly, “Hello, Stiles, what do you need to know?”

Stiles’ back goes stiff because he knows that voice, it’s the voice. He sees Derek’s fists clench and unclench. Peter remains absolutely calm, still. It’s lucky that Stiles took the drugs, because otherwise he’s sure his voice would jump an octave. “I’m doing some research for kind of a local case? And I’m trying to keep it on the down low, so . . .”

“I can keep a secret,” Marin says.

“Okay, so, is it possible to make someone . . . feel a certain way, with a spell? Like a love spell or something?”

“It would be difficult,” Marin says. “The person would try to reject it. Deep down they would know it wasn’t real. But yes, it could be done.”

“Would they have any, um, any symptoms of that? Like, erratic behavior?”

“Absolutely,” Marin says. “Depression would be a real issue. Anger, lashing out at others because they subconsciously knew something had been done to them.”

Stiles desperately wants to get off this phone call so he can scream, but he forces himself to go through the rest of the script, ask intelligent questions, and then talk to Deucalion again at the end. “Do me a favor and don’t mention this to anyone, okay? I think I might be onto something big, and I’d hate to screw it up now.”

“Of course,” Deucalion says. “Just let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”
“Thanks,” Stiles says, and then says goodbye and hangs up. He hyperventilates into Derek’s shoulder for a few minutes while Derek rubs circles into his back. Finally, he collects himself enough to look up at Peter and says, “Do you think he knows?”

“I don’t think so,” Peter says. “Otherwise he wouldn’t have made that offer at the end.”

Stiles nods. “So what do we do now?”

“Nothing,” Peter says. “We’re going to need to get him here. We don’t dare confront him on his own territory, with his pack present and his witches nearby. But we don’t dare extend an invitation so soon, because we’ll tip our hand. We’re going to wait a few days, and then you’re going to call and ask him to come here. But for now, nothing.” He thinks about this for a moment. “I want everyone staying at the house until then. Your father included. I’ll make those arrangements. You should get some rest, Stiles. You look terrible.” With that parting comment, he turns and walks away.

“Uh, thanks,” Stiles says to the werewolf’s retreating back. He shakes his head a little but then tucks his face into Derek’s shoulder. “Carry me,” he says, and Derek huffs out a soft laugh before getting to his feet, lifting Stiles in his arms.

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Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Okay, my lovelies, before the chapter, I have a very important announcement to make for those of you who don't follow me on tumblr . . . I have a book! (An e-book, to be precise!) It’s called The Emperor’s Mirror, and it’s a YA novel about magic! Mystery! Monks! Other things that don’t start with ‘m’, up to and including dragons! Check out my tumblr for more information!

At first when Isaac wakes up, he’s not aware of much. A vague scent he doesn’t recognize, almost too clean, antiseptic. There’s a low murmur of voices around him and gentle pressure on his hand. He tries to squeeze back but his muscles aren’t really cooperating, and then he passes out again.

But he wakes up later with a start because there’s some beeping noise that’s like an icpick drilling into his ear. “Gahhhh, wha’s tha,” he mumbles, trying to get his hands up over his ears and getting tangled up in cords and tubes.

“Hey, easy, easy,” a voice says. Cora’s voice. He recognizes it, but it’s just the tiniest bit different; he can hear timbre and tone to it that wasn’t there before. It’s musical and amazing and also way too loud. He gives an unmanly whimper.

A few moments later, the beeping stops, and the world refocuses a little. “Sorry, it was just the monitor,” Cora says, squeezing his hand again. “Is that better?”

“Better,” Isaac mumbles, and he can feel his body sliding back towards sleep. He tries to rouse himself. “Cora.”

“I’m here,” she says. It sounds like she’s on the edge of tears. “You’re safe now. I’m not going anywhere, not ever.”

“Mmkay,” Isaac says, and passes out despite himself.

Some time even more later, he wakes up to the feeling of hands on his abdomen, gently pressing down in various places. “Gettin’ a li’l person’l there,” he slurs out, and tries again to surface. He’s waking up for real now, bits and pieces at a time, trying to put the world back in order. His senses are being assaulted in twenty different directions. The smells alone are enough to knock him for a loop. He can smell everything about Cora, her coconut shampoo and the mint on her breath from the gum she’s been chewing and the unique, underlying scent that’s just Cora. He can smell Talia, too, coffee and faint perfume, and he knows it’s her without knowing how.

“How’s it look?” Talia asks the doctor. Her voice echoes strangely in the room, ringing in Isaac’s ears. He winces despite himself.

“Much better, definitely,” another voice, this one deep and masculine. “If it keeps healing at this rate, he’ll probably be out of the hospital tomorrow, barring any complications.”

Talia and Cora both breathe a sigh of relief. He can smell their relief, acrid and sharp and very, very strange. He finally manages to get his vision to focus, and he immediately zeroes in on Cora,
standing beside him. Her hair is escaping from her braid, and she looks tired, with dark smudges underneath her eyes. He wonders what time it is and how long he’s been unconscious. There’s a clock in the room somewhere; he knows that because he can hear it ticking. When he locates it, it’s seven thirty. He wonders if that’s AM or PM.

The doctor exchanges a few more words with Talia, and then leaves. The alpha slumps into a chair, pushing both hands through her hair and leaving it in disarray. She obviously hasn’t slept, either. Isaac wants to be surprised by that. He thinks that yesterday (or however many days ago), he would have been. But now he understands, he feels Talia in a way that he didn’t before. It’s not just that she’s his alpha. He’s her beta. He belongs to her, and he knows she would sit at his bedside as long as she needed to.

Cora sees Isaac looking around and says, “Hey, you gonna fall asleep again?” Her efforts to sound light and nonchalant are betrayed by the welter of scents coming off her, the fear and distress and pain. Isaac understands now how communication is a completely different ballgame in a werewolf pack. He has to reply to her words, but bear her scent in mind in how he does so.

“I think I’m awake for now,” he rasps, and clears his throat. “I’m thirsty. What time is it?”

Talia gets him a cup of water. “You’re lucky, the doctor just cleared you for oral intake as long as it’s liquid,” she says, and holds the cup to his mouth. “Take it slow, now,” she warns, and he takes little sips. “It’s seven thirty in the morning. You were hurt yesterday, so you were unconscious the evening and then the night. The doctor was just doing his morning rounds.”

“Are you in any pain?” Cora asks anxiously. “They’ve got you on painkillers but it can be really hard to dose people right after the Bite. They don’t know how much of you is human and how much is werewolf.”

Isaac shifts slightly. There’s a little bit of a burn in his abdomen, but nothing he can’t handle. “I’m okay,” he says. “Can I see it?”

“If you want,” Talia says, and helps Isaac tilt his head so he can see the patch of shiny pink skin where the wound was. “It’s healing well. The doctor says he doesn’t even think it’ll scar.”

“Crazy,” Isaac says, letting his head drop back. “Thanks for, um, wolfing me,” he says to Talia.

Talia brushes his hair out of his face. “Thank you for surviving,” she says. She looks up and over her shoulder. “If you’re feeling up to it, I know that Deputy Parrish wanted to talk to you about what happened. You don’t have to, if you don’t want to. You will eventually, but we can put it off a little longer.”

“I guess I should,” Isaac says, “before my dad hops on a bus to Mexico.”

Talia shakes her head a little. “Your father is in custody, Isaac. He’ll stay there until the police can take your statement. You don’t have to rush into anything.”

“Oh.” Isaac thinks about this. “No, I’ll talk to them, I’d rather get it over with, but . . . will you both stay with me?”

“Of course,” Talia says, and Cora grips his hand so tightly that Isaac knows nobody would be getting her to go anywhere. “You’re not alone anymore, Isaac. You’ll never be alone again.” She choked up a little, which makes Isaac stare at her in amazement. “I’m so, so sorry that I wasn’t able to keep you safe. I never should have allowed this to happen.”

“It . . . it’s okay,” Isaac says, feeling incredibly awkward. “I mean, you tried. I kind of didn’t help
you out a lot.”

“Maybe you two should just both agree not to blame yourselves and we can move on,” Cora suggests hesitantly, and Isaac laughs a little despite himself. Talia gives his shoulder a squeeze and then leaves to find the deputy.

“Are you okay?” Isaac asks Cora, who looks even more exhausted.

“Now that I know you will be,” she says. “I . . . kind of had a freak-out.”

“It was scary,” Isaac agrees. “But I just . . . I knew I couldn’t leave you.”

Cora turns faintly pink, and leans down to give him a kiss. He returns it, gentle and chaste. Then she rests her head against his shoulder, rubbing her scent all over him, and for the first time he truly understands that, too. “You smell really good,” he says, and her blush goes even darker.

Talia comes in about five minutes later with Deputy Parrish. She’s got a new cup of coffee for herself, and hot tea with lemon for Cora. Isaac watches Cora perk up the instant she smells it, and smiles despite himself. Parrish sits down in Talia’s seat while the alpha stands behind her daughter.

“Okay, Isaac,” he says, “just tell me what happened. Take it as slow as you need to.”

Isaac nods and does so. He watches Talia’s hand on Cora’s shoulder, watches the muscles flex as he describes the situation in the basement. He doesn’t mention the freezer. He’s just not sure anyone – well, anyone in the police – would believe him. So he just says that his father was trying to make him clean up the tools, he shoved him, and he fell. Parrish takes notes, and then thanks Isaac at the end.

Talia looks over at him and says, “First-degree assault, I suppose?”

“Yeah,” Parrish says. “No premeditation, no attempted murder charge.”

“He was gonna bury me,” Isaac says, and he hears Cora growl, low in her throat. “He said. There was a grave he had dug earlier that day, and he said he would just make it deeper.”

Parrish and Talia exchange a look. “He was in the graveyard when we picked him up,” Parrish says. “I figured we wouldn’t be able to do much with that since he owned the place, but if he actually told you that was his intent . . .”

“Yeah,” Isaac says, somewhat hoarsely. He’s tired, all of a sudden. “Yeah, that’s what he said.”

“Okay.” Parrish closes his notebook and stands up. “We’ll talk to the DA about getting the charges sorted out.”

“Thank you, Deputy,” Talia says, shaking his hand. “Keep in touch.” She waits until he’s gone, then says, “Get some rest, Isaac. I can tell that was tough on you.”

“Want to stay with Cora,” he says, trying to keep his eyes open.

“I’ll be right here,” she says, her voice thin and strained. Isaac wants to protest that he can’t make her feel better if he’s asleep, but it’s far too much effort. He closes his eyes and lets the exhaustion pull him back under.
Stiles is sure he won’t sleep at all after their phone call to Deucalion on top of Isaac being in the hospital. He tosses and turns for an hour or so. Derek tries to soothe him. Eventually he drifts off, but has bad dreams and wakes up twice. The second time, he just gets up. It’s about four AM. The house is dark and quiet, but he’s surprised to find his father and Peter in the kitchen, talking quietly.

“Are you okay?” his father asks him, seeing him hesitate.

“Yeah, I just . . . trouble sleeping. What are you guys doing up?”

Tom glances at Peter, who says, “It seems wise to have something of a shift of watches, just until everything is dealt with. I’ve been bringing your father up to date.”

“Oh,” Stiles says. He leans against the refrigerator and tries to process. His brain seems to be running in a low gear. “Any word from the hospital?”

“Isaac woke up long enough to complain about the noise of his heart monitor and then fell back to sleep,” Tom says. “He seems to be healing well.’

“Good,” Stiles says. He rubs a hand over his face. “Can I stay home from school? And by ‘stay home’ I mean ‘can I go to the hospital and visit’?”

“Sure,” his father says, “as long as you try to get more sleep first.”

“We’ve been talking about how we’re going to get Deucalion here,” Peter says. “I hear from your father that you’ve had some very promising breakthroughs on the nursery case.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. He decides to make himself some tea, and pulls a mug out of the cupboard. “Yeah, Jesus. We found that one lady who worked in Toledo and pulled up her associates and suddenly it’s like an entire branch of the WLO that we missed in our last sweep, that’s been working on finding a cure for lycanthropy. Whether the werewolves want it or not.”

“Interesting,” Peter says, “and very, very helpful. Duke will want to hear about that, I’m sure, but he’s been fairly adamant about not exchanging too much information over e-mail.” He takes a drink of his tea. “On Friday, you’re going to call him, tell him briefly about this breakthrough, and ask if he can make his way to Beacon Hills over the weekend. We’ll see if he takes the bait.”

Stiles nods. The next several days suddenly seem interminably long to him. “I feel like I’ve got the Sword of . . . Isoceles . . . hanging over my head.”

“Damocles,” Peter corrects.

“Yeah, right, Damocles. Isoceles is a triangle.” Stiles fidgets a little. “What’s going to happen when Duke gets here?”

Peter glances at Tom and then says, “Nothing that you need to be concerned about. Or know about, for that matter.”

There’s a small part of Stiles that wants to protest, but it’s drowned out by the much larger part which is awash in relief that he won’t have to help Peter murder somebody he considered a friend. “What if he brings his pack with him?”

“Well, the beauty of this ruse is that it isn’t a ruse,” Peter says. “If, for whatever reason, I feel
things won’t . . . work out as intended, we’ll have a nice dinner, you can tell him about the developments in your case, and he’ll go back to his own territory none the wiser. Whereupon we can come up with a plan B.”

“Okay.” The water is starting to boil, so Stiles pours it into the mug, dunking the tea bag in and out. He’s starting to yawn as it steeps, and he decides to take it back up to the bedroom. He falls asleep curled up next to Derek before he even drinks any of it.

Stiles might have the day off, but Derek isn’t so lucky. He could call in, but he had said the night before that he had missed so much work lately that he really doesn’t want to. When the alarm goes off, he growls and stumbles out of bed. Stiles decides to get up with him. He probably won’t fall back to sleep anyway, and he wants an update.

Laura is in the kitchen, making breakfast for the kids. She looks up as they come in and exchanges a greeting with them. Stiles has barely opened his mouth when she says, “Isaac’s doing well, he woke up around seven thirty and was coherent enough to talk to the police. Mom says he was awake for about an hour and then fell back to sleep.”

“Oh, good,” Stiles says.

“The doctor says he’s healing well, and they think he should be out of the hospital some time tomorrow,” Laura says. “I thought I – ”

“Unca Isaac! Unca Isaac!” Tyler shouts, bouncing in his chair.

Laura smiles a little and says, “Would take the kids to see him this afternoon.”

“Unca Isaac now!” Tyler demands.

“No,” Laura says, “Tyler, we talked about this. Uncle Isaac will be asleep most of this morning, so we’re going to go see him this afternoon. No more shouting or you’ll get a time-out.”

“Boooo,” Tyler says, but devotes his attention to his cereal.

“Well, I’m going to head over here now, to keep Cora company,” Stiles says. “Though I want to make a stop on the way. Dad told me that Isaac’s phone got ruined. I guess, uh, I guess he bled on it. A lot.” Everyone present gives a wince at this. “Liquid damage, you know. So I thought I would stop and pick him up a new one. I know how boring sitting in a hospital can be.”

Derek scowls at this, as he always does whenever mention of Stiles’ injuries comes up, and leans over to surreptitiously scent mark him. Stiles glances up at him with a crooked smile. They each eat a quick bowl of cereal. Derek promises to keep his phone on him so he’ll be aware of any updates, and Stiles gets moving. He doubts Talia and Cora have eaten anything, so he decides to stop and pick them up some breakfast. There’s a good bakery a few miles away from the hospital. He gets them each a croissant sandwich.

Between that and the trip to the phone store, it’s about ten thirty when he gets to the hospital. Cora has finally fallen asleep, slumped over Isaac’s chest. He’s asleep too, but Talia isn’t, and she accepts his offer of breakfast gratefully. He hesitates for a few moments, wondering what, if anything, he’s supposed to tell her about Deucalion. He decides on nothing. Peter can decide what Talia needs to know. Instead, they talk about Isaac’s father and what’s going to happen to him. The answer, sadly, is not that he’ll be fed to a Sarlacc, which would be Stiles’ personal recommendation.

Isaac wakes up about an hour later, although Cora continues to sleep. He looks better than she does
at this point; color has returned to his cheeks, and once awake he seems alert and interested in his surroundings. Talia glances at her phone and says, “I have some work things I need to see to. Isaac, will you be all right with Stiles and Cora for company?”

“I’ll be fine,” Isaac says.

Talia still looks dubious, and Stiles adds, “Laura was going to bring the kids by after lunch,” and she subsides, heading for the door. To Isaac, he says, “Tyler’s psyched about seeing you. You’re his new favorite uncle. I’ve been displaced; it’s very sad.”

Isaac flushes pink and says, “He’ll remember who makes the cookies soon enough.”

“True,” Stiles says. He hesitates, then says, “So, uh . . . your phone got kinda ruined. I got a new one for you. So, you know. You wouldn’t be so bored.”

“Oh, thanks.” Isaac takes it, but then holds onto it for a moment before handing it back. “What happened to my old one?”

“I have it, actually, my dad gave it to me. Did you want it?” Stiles asks. Derek had been talking about putting it in the box, although that seems a little morbid to Stiles. Then again, the entire concept of the box was kind of morbid. With some time, the day Isaac became a werewolf and an official part of their pack would be a good memory.

“Just . . . I’d like to save some of the conversations I had with Cora,” Isaac says, turning pink. “They’re important to me.”

“Oh, sure. I can swap out the SIM card for you. Just help me remember.” Stiles fidgets, then blurts out, “Look, dude. I’m really sorry. I know that you think I’m a nosy jerk a lot of the time. And I am, I mean, I won’t deny that. Most of the pack just kind of lets it ride, but I do this thing where sometimes I think I know what’s best and I forget that I’m just a kid, so I’m sorry that you got hurt.”

“Uh . . . why are you sorry?” Isaac asks, frowning slightly. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I did, though,” Stiles says, the words tumbling out of his mouth. “I told my dad about your bruises. He went and talked to your dad and that’s why your dad was so awful to you. It’s all my fault. You could have died and it would have been my fault.”

Isaac blinks at him for a minute, then says, “No. Really. What happened . . . it could have happened any time. Six months ago, or six months from now. It could have happened even if I had never met you or Cora. My dad’s temper . . . just got away from him and I got hurt. It’s happened before. This was just the time I got hurt worst. You’re the reason I survived. If I hadn’t met you – if you hadn’t been trying to help me – I wouldn’t have had the phone. I wouldn’t have been able to call for help, and I would have died there.”

“I – oh.” Stiles rubs his knuckles over his eyes. “You’re sure? You aren’t mad?”

“No. I mean, you are a nosy jerk,” Isaac says, and Stiles laughs a little. “But you’re a nosy jerk who saved my life and helped me meet Cora, so . . . you’re okay in my book.”

“Okay.” Stiles sniffles. “Don’t tell anyone I’m crying, okay?”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Isaac says.
Isaac is indeed out of the hospital the next day, looking almost as good as new. He’s still got some soreness around the puncture wound, but other than that he’s fine. Talia and Aaron bring him back to his house, where he packs up his things. Cora wants him to share her room, and nobody argues. They try not to let him carry too many things, but he insists that he’s fine.

Cora’s being clingy and anxious and won’t let him out of her sight, but everyone figures that’s pretty normal, given all the givens. She spends most of her time curled up in his lap on the sofa, rubbing her cheek against his collarbone every once in a while. It’s take-out night, and they get massive amounts of Chinese and Talia lets them eat in the living room while they binge watch on The Simpsons.

Somewhere in the middle of an episode, Stiles slips out to the back porch. As expected, he finds Peter there. The werewolf gives him a slight nod, and says, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, and before he can give himself time to think, he pulls Deucalion up in his phone’s memory and hits send. Deucalion picks up on the second ring. “Hey, Duke, listen,” Stiles says, “you’re not gonna believe this, but I think I’ve actually got a lead on the nursery case.”

“You’re kidding,” Deucalion says.

“No. It’s some crazy shit, too. I think I’ve found a branch of the WLO that hasn’t been caught yet.”

“That’s amazing, Stiles,” Deucalion says. “How much of it can you prove?”

“What happened to the babies, most of,” Stiles says. “The existence of this branch of the WLO, it’s maybe fifty-fifty. Do you want me to send you what I’ve got?”

“Better if you don’t,” Deucalion says, and Stiles breathes a sigh of relief. “I’ll tell you what – I’m going to hop on a flight up to northern California first thing in the morning. I’ll see you tomorrow. Okay?”

“Sure, okay,” Stiles says. They exchange goodbyes and he hangs up. Stiles is feeling celebratory, but Peter is frowning. “What?”

“I’m not sure I like how eager he was,” Peter says. “It could be that he really hates the WLO. Or it could be that he’s got other engagements and wants to fit this in where he can. Or it could be that he smells a rat and wants it taken care of sooner rather than later.” He stands up. “I don’t want you here tomorrow, Stiles. I’ll handle this myself. I want you and the rest of the pack somewhere safe.”

Stiles thinks about arguing, then sees the look on Peter’s face. He nods instead. “Okay.”

He goes back inside and settles down in front of the television. Peter comes with him, and has a quiet word with Talia. When the episode ends, Talia turns off the TV and clears her throat. The atmosphere instantly goes tense, but her voice is calm and even as she says, “We’re going to need the house tomorrow. Cora, Isaac, you’re going to stay with Scott and his mother. Jonathan, if you could take Laura and the kids to your folks’ house. Derek, Stiles, you’ll be at the Stilinski house with the sheriff. Is everybody clear on that?”

Everyone nods, and nobody asks any questions. Isaac looks at Cora a little anxiously, but she squeezes his forearm and he subsides. They clean up what’s left of dinner, and Stiles knows he’s not going to get any sleep at all. That’s what he thinks, but then Derek decides that amazing sex is
a good cure for insomnia. He’s right. Stiles passes out and doesn’t wake until the first rays of sunlight hit his eyes.

“Is Isaac gone already?” he asks, yawning over a bowl of cereal.

“He and Cora left about twenty minutes ago, yes,” Talia says. “Why?”

“I still have his phone,” Stiles says. “He gave it to me so I could swap out the SIM card from his old one. I keep meaning to give it back to him and forgetting.”

“We could stop by Scott’s on the way to your dad’s,” Derek says.

“Nah, I don’t think he needs it that badly,” Stiles says. “Just remind me later today.”

They finish their breakfast and then adjourn to the Stilinski house. It’s a Saturday, and Tom is in the living room, reading. “Wanna watch the game later?” he asks Derek, who agrees. In the meantime, they go out into the backyard. It’s a beautiful spring day. Derek starts tending to the flower beds they planted the previous year while Stiles lolls in the sunshine.

They don’t exactly have a timetable for what’s going to happen, so he’s stuck waiting and wondering. He doesn’t even know exactly what Peter plans to do, although he’s fairly sure that it involves killing Deucalion as soon as he walks onto Hale property. He got the impression that he has ways of taking down an alpha, that Talia and Aaron are there only as backup in case things get out of hand.

He wonders what that’s like for Peter. Sitting there, waiting to kill someone. He doubts that it bothers Peter very much. But he doesn’t think he could do it. Deliberately lure someone in with the intent to kill them. Someone who had been his friend. Deucalion has done some terrible things, that’s true, but Stiles doesn’t know how he feels about killing him. He’s aware that there isn’t any other way, that Deucalion is an alpha, that his plans to destroy the Ceremonies have to be stopped.

After a few minutes to consider, he decides it’s not understanding why that’s the problem. He could have killed Kate Argent, he thinks. Knowing that she had plans to murder his father, his pack. He would have been able to stop her by any means necessary. But Deucalion’s motives seem so foreign to him. He still doesn’t really understand them, and it seems so at odds with the way the alpha had behaved. He would have sworn that Deucalion had been genuinely pleased at the work they had been doing together. Maybe he was. Maybe he really could compartmentalize that much.

“When do you think we might hear?” he asks Derek, though he doubts Derek will know.

Derek glances up. “What time was Duke’s plane supposed to get in?”


“Probably by noon, then,” Derek says. Stiles checks his watch. It’s only ten thirty. Deucalion’s plane hasn’t even touched down. He’s going to be a twitchy mess for the next hour at least. He downloads some apps onto Isaac’s phone to pass the time, paces back and forth, even tries to do homework. Every time he checks his watch, it’s like even less time has gone by.

“I think I’m going to go bake something,” he says, and Derek glances up from where he’s working in the garden.

“Okay, I’ll finish up here and be in soon,” he says.

Stiles gets up, brushes the dirt off the knees of his jeans, and goes into the house. His father is still
on the sofa. “I’m okay,” he says, fending off the question before it can be asked. “Just a little jumpy, that’s all. I’m going to make some apple cinnamon muffins.”

“Okay,” his father says, and Stiles goes into the kitchen. He takes out a few apples and starts to peel them. This will keep him busy for a while. His mind is in so many places that he barely notices when Derek comes in and drops a kiss on the back of his neck, steals an apple slice, and then starts rooting around in the refrigerator.

He’s just finished peeling and coring the apples when the doorbell rings. Derek looks up suddenly, like a deer scenting danger, as Tom heads for the door. “Wait, don’t – ” he says, and then the door basically explodes inwards in a shower of splinters. Tom staggers back, caught off guard, and Deucalion walks in like he owns the place. He backhands Tom just as he’s starting to catch his balance, and the sheriff collapses to the floor in a heap.

“Dad!” Stiles cries, and Derek shoves his way in front of Stiles, snarling. It doesn’t matter even a little. Deucalion grabs him by the throat and lifts him right up off the floor, pinning him against the wall.

“Well, Stiles,” the blind werewolf says, “I think it’s time you and I had a little chat.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Stiles stands frozen for a minute, assessing his chances. Deucalion is blind, true, and Stiles is still holding the knife he had been chopping apples with. It’s not much of a weapon, but it’s something. Then he sees the way that Deucalion’s claws are digging into Derek’s neck and reluctantly puts the knife down. All he’ll do is get Derek killed if he tries anything. “Okay,” he says, trying to keep his voice even. He wonders wildly what happened at the Hale house. If Peter and the others are dead, and now Deucalion has come for him. Or maybe Deucalion didn’t even go to the Hale house. Maybe he came straight to the Stilinskis. That seems more likely, once he can scrape up some rational thought. Talia was at the Hale house. She wouldn’t have stood there and let her little brother be killed. If Talia had been killed, Derek would know, so odds are good that the werewolves at the den are fine, sitting there waiting for Deucalion to arrive with no idea that he had gone somewhere else. “Let’s chat.”

Behind him, Stiles sees his father trying to struggle to his feet. He shakes his head as though dizzy. Then he sees where Derek is and stops moving. “Good thinking, sheriff,” Deucalion says. “I’d hate for anything to happen to Derek. And believe it or not, I can hear every move you make. Which reminds me – Stiles, take your phone out of your pocket and hand it to me.”

Stiles hesitates and realizes he’s had an incredible stroke of luck, one that might actually save his life. He slowly reaches into his back pocket and takes out not his own phone, but Isaac’s. He hands it over to Deucalion, who takes it in his free hand and crushes it, dropping the remnants to the floor. Stiles swallows hard but doesn’t say anything. Slowly, beyond slowly, he slides his own phone out of his other pocket, and turns it to silent. He doesn’t need it ringing before he gets a chance to use it.

“Now, where were we?” Deucalion says, still holding Derek aloft. He’s kicking helplessly, prying at Deucalion’s hand and trying to get it to loosen.

“Please,” Stiles says desperately, watching Derek’s face turn red. “Please let him go. Please don’t hurt him. He – he’s everything to me.”

“Oh, I know,” Deucalion says. “I’m intimately familiar with what the loss of a mate does to someone. Relax, Derek – I’m not going to kill you. Not yet, anyway.” He drops Derek, but doesn’t say anything. Slowly, beyond slowly, he slides his own phone out of his other pocket, and turns it to silent. He doesn’t need it ringing before he gets a chance to use it.

“Why are you doing this?” Stiles asks. Maybe he can stall. When Deucalion doesn’t show up at the Hale house, they’ll know something’s wrong. If Stiles doesn’t answer their phone calls – and stalling is at least something to do, something to focus on, and anything’s better than nothing.

“Well, you became a problem, Stiles,” Deucalion says. “I couldn’t let you throw a wrench into the works now, not after I’ve been developing this plan for years – relax, Derek,” Deucalion adds, and
gives Derek’s arm a savage twist. Derek’s face goes white and he gives a gasp of pain.


Deucalion doesn’t answer his question. “We’ve got places to be,” he says. “Sheriff, you won’t be needed,” he says, and for a white-hot-panicked moment, Stiles thinks his father is about to die. But then Deucalion reaches into his jacket and throws a roll of duct tape onto the floor. “Sit there,” he says, pointing to the area right next to the stairs. “Stiles, you’ll secure him for me.”

Stiles nods a little and picks up the roll of duct tape. Reluctantly, his father sits down by the banister. Stiles tears off a few strips of duct tape. He folds them so they won’t really be sticky and starts wrapping them around his father’s wrists, half-assedly tying him to the banister. It takes a few minutes before he straightens up and says, “Okay, done.”

“Mm hm.” Deucalion drags Derek over with him, bends over, and tugs at the duct tape. It slides halfway off Tom’s wrists. “Not good enough,” Deucalion says, and punctuates this remark with another twist to Derek’s arm. He strangles back a howl of pain.

“Jesus, stop, stop!” Stiles cries out. “I’ll do it, okay?” He picks up the duct tape again and tries to hold back tears as he starts over. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” he whispers. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry,” Tom says evenly. “You just do what he says, okay? You don’t need to be sorry about that.”

Stiles sniffs and tries to get a hold of himself. He’s going to need every ounce of brainpower he has if any of them are going to walk away from this. He secures his father to the banister, adding tape to his ankles and then over his mouth when Deucalion tells him to. Deucalion checks all of this, still holding onto Derek with almost no effort.

“Much better,” he says, nodding. “All right, then. Let’s go for a ride. You’ll have to drive, obviously.”

“Oh . . . okay,” Stiles says. His phone is a comforting presence in his back pocket as he picks up his keys and heads out for the Jeep. Deucalion doesn’t seem to care if anyone sees them. Stiles gets behind the driver’s seat, and Deucalion shoves Derek into the back with him. Stiles’ gaze flicks up to the rearview mirror to check on his mate. He’s pale but alert, blood trickling down his chin from a wound in his lip that he must have inflicted himself, as it’s now gone.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking,” Deucalion says. “So let’s make something clear. Don’t think about steering us into a ditch or a wall or anything like that. I’m an alpha. I’m the alpha of alphas. I will survive anything you throw at me, and I will rip Derek’s throat out before you can do so much as scratch me. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” Stiles says, his voice wobbling.

“Drive. Right out of the driveway, left at the end of your street.”

“Okay.” Stiles’ hands are shaking so hard that it’s difficult to hold the wheel, but he manages it. He wishes he had some of Peter’s Xanax now. “What’s that mean, the – the alpha of alphas?” He’s seen Derek fight. He’s no master at it, but he can usually hold his own, even against an alpha, if it’s for only a few minutes. But Deucalion had taken him down as quickly and easily as if he had been a child.

“After I was blinded, my pack rejected me,” Deucalion says. “My own Left Hand tried to kill me. But even blind, I was stronger than him. I killed him. And then I realized a curious thing. When I...
killed him, I absorbed his power. I became stronger. So I killed the rest of them, too. And now, here I am, the most powerful alpha to ever exist. Turn onto Route 70.”

Stiles swallows. “We’re going to the house in the woods.”

“Yes, very good, Stiles,” Deucalion says. “I need a quiet place where we can talk for a little while. I need to know how much you’ve figured out, so I can do damage control.”

“I won’t – ”

“Yes, you will,” Deucalion says dismissively. “You’re tough, Stiles. But you don’t have what it takes to stay quiet while I play in Derek’s entrails. You’re in way over your head.”

Stiles bites his lip to keep from crying. “You’re just going to kill us both anyway.”

“No, no,” Deucalion says. “It was never my plan to kill you both. One of you. Yes. Ah, but which one? You won’t know that until I’ve gotten what I need from you.”

“Why?” Stiles asks again.

“I suppose at this point it’s customary for the villain to explain,” Deucalion says, with a shrug. “I lost everything, Stiles. You can’t imagine what that’s like. And ever since then, every time I saw a mated pair like you and Derek, my stomach turned. It enrages me in a way I could never put into words. So, simply put, I decided to destroy the entire institution.”

“Jesus,” Stiles says. “So since you can’t be happy, nobody else can be, either?”

“Yes, precisely,” Deucalion says, as if this makes perfect sense. It’s a motive that never would have occurred to Stiles, cast-iron-crazy reasoning that could only come from someone who was truly insane.

Stiles has more questions, but decides to stay quiet for now. He’s going to need to keep Deucalion talking once they’re at the house. He’s going to need time for Peter or Talia or anyone to come to his rescue. The longer he can stall Deucalion, the better. So he shuts his mouth and tries not to look in the rearview mirror too much, tries not to let the pained expression on Derek’s face preoccupy him.

“We’re here,” he says, pulling into the driveway about twenty minutes later.

“Yes, I know,” Deucalion says. He keeps his hand wrapped around Derek’s wrist as he exits the Jeep, then pulls Derek out with him. Derek makes a hissing noise of pain, but doesn’t say anything. Stiles is tense and on edge. He grabs his phone again and makes sure everything is on silent, not just the ringtone but the keypad and the text messaging noise and everything. Then he follows Deucalion up to the house.

“Well,” Deucalion says, and shoves Derek to the floor. Derek starts to get up, but Deucalion slams his foot down on Derek’s hand, and he flinches. His other foot rests gently on Derek’s abdomen. “Down to brass tacks. Tell me how you got to me, Stiles.”

Stiles lets out a breath. He’s got his phone in front of him, and God, how lucky is he that Deucalion is blind? “Seth told us everything,” he says, typing a text to Peter on his phone as quickly as he can. ‘gonna call u. don’t say anything when u pick up. ok?’

“Seth never knew anything about the larger plan, and he certainly never knew anything about me,” Deucalion says.
“No, but . . . he knew who had hired him, where the ads appeared, where the money came from.”
Stiles speaks slowly and deliberately. Peter has already replied, ‘ok’, so he presses the phone into
his stomach to muffle it and speaks loudly to cover up the noise of it ringing on the other end. “We
did all this computer work, we got to your bank account. Hammurabi Industries. An eye for an eye.
Right?”

Deucalion laughs. “I admit that was probably a bit too clever of me,” he says, and Stiles pulls
the phone away from his shirt a little. He sees that the call has connected. Peter is listening. Peter will
be able to get the location from his GPS. Now all he needs to do is stay alive. “But that’s hardly
conclusive. I was very careful with the money.”

“No, we couldn’t be sure, but it seemed like – like you fit all the evidence, right? We knew
Gerard’s killer was an alpha. And we knew he was friends with Druids because of what was done
to Cora. And it just seemed weird to me, that you turned up in Talia’s life right now. Like you
wanted a ringside seat to what was going to happen. Jesus, Duke, why us? What did Talia do to
you?”

“Oh, nothing,” Deucalion says. “I just knew that Talia would be reluctant to reject whoever her
daughter picked, after what happened with you.” He shrugs a little. “I’m sorry it had to be a friend,
but not so sorry that it mattered.”

Stiles pushes both hands through his hair. He needs to talk slower. Needs to delay. His mind clicks
away furiously. “You knew we were onto you. You – you did that thing with the – when you came
to the house – ” He begins to stammer and stutter. “Seth said that – about – oh god, what’s the
word when you can’t – can’t see – ”

“Blind,” Deucalion supplies automatically.

“He said that about you being blind and you did that thing with the, with the knife, and – later it
occurred to me, that was kind of an overreaction. Like, it wasn’t exactly a – a remark that was – ”
Stiles whines again, tugging on his hair. “Jesus, I can’t – I can’t – ”

“What about it,” Deucalion snaps. His foot applies pressure to Derek’s abdomen, and he grunts in

“I can’t, I can’t remember the word, I’m sorry,” Stiles says, letting tears start down his face. “I’m
so sorry, please don’t hurt Derek. I just forget words sometimes. It’s because of the brain damage – ”

“Yes, I’m well aware of your deficiencies,” Deucalion says. “Seth made a tactless remark. Is that
it?”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “Yeah. And . . . yes, it was tactless, but it was kind of a natural reaction, too.
You didn’t even seem mad. You just – thunk – with the knife – and we all thought it was awesome
because we had all been getting pissed off by Seth for weeks at that point but there was no reason
for you to do that. You wanted to see how we would react.”


Stiles squeezes his eyes shut. “Your wife was the witch enchanting Cora.”

Deucalion frowns a little. “How could you possibly know that?”

“I – I heard her. I didn’t recognize her voice. I followed Seth here one night and snuck in. I had
copied his – the things that unlock other things. I recorded her.”
“And that’s why you called and asked to talk to her the other night,” Deucalion says. “I had wondered. That’s good to know. I was afraid it was some sort of secret code, that you two were working together. I suppose I can let her live, in that case.”

“But Duke, it’s not going to work,” Stiles says. “They had to bring Cora out here all the time. She constantly rejected the conditioning. I mean, I know you told him to be an asshole, but, but what did that prove?”

“Nothing,” Deucalion says, with a shrug. “But I never needed it to be a one hundred percent success. I only need to prove that the process can be manipulated. And I think I’ve done that rather nicely, haven’t I?” He shakes his head. “Some of my sponsors want to sell off the method, use it as a way to infiltrate packs. They think I’m going to let them, but to be honest, I never had any intention of doing that. I just want to destroy this, once and for all. Now, this has been fun, but . . .”

Stiles looks at his phone. Eight minutes have gone by. If he’s lucky, Peter’s driving like a bat out of hell, and bringing the entire Spanish Armada with him. “How did you even know?” he chokes out, letting himself sound just as freaked out as he is. “How did you know we had figured it out?”

“Please,” Deucalion says. “You asked me to believe that you had actually found a new lead in that case with the dead babies? That it led to a new branch of the WLO? How absolutely transparent could you be? If that was Peter’s idea, he’s really lost his edge.”


“Oh, really,” Deucalion drawls.

“I did, asshole,” Stiles says. “Or actually, a guy named Leo Stewart did. He was one of the fathers. And he went missing about a year and a half ago. I found it when I was just throwing everything at the wall to see what stuck. He stumbled onto it somehow, I don’t know how. There was a facility in Toledo. A woman from the WLO named Ashley Gould worked there.”

“I’ve heard of her,” Deucalion says, a little more interested.

“This group – they were trying to figure out a way to cure lycanthropy,” Stiles says. He glances at his watch and talks slower. “They figured – they could go in and give the cure to babies. The birth rate of werewolves would start to drop. Nobody would understand why. They were going to try to make them extinct. But something went wrong. They thought it would work in babies – they’ve still got a lot of stem cells, right? So they could repair any damage that was done. But they couldn’t. And I actually – I figured it out from the – the reports that the – the dead people reports.”

“Autopsies,” Deucalion says.

“Right. I realized – the autopsy I had for Leo Stewart’s baby looked a lot like Gerard Argent’s. Because it was the same process. Total organ failure. An autoimmune response. A – God dammit, why can’t I remember what those stupid molecules are called?”

Deucalion sighs impatiently. “Get on with it.”

Stiles pushes both hands through his hair and looks at Derek, who’s still pale but clearly waiting. He knows that Stiles is stalling; he can recognize when Stiles has truly lost words. “It doesn’t matter! I figured it out, okay? They were trying to cure the babies and they failed, and when we checked into Gould’s time living in Toledo, we found some contacts that we hadn’t known about before and now they’re fucking arrested.”
“That’s truly amazing, Stiles,” Deucalion says. “You are very good at what you do, you know. I’ve truly appreciated all your help with all the WLO cases. How many new members did you turn up? Eight? Ten? Psychotic murderers that we hadn’t known about. I took care of them, of course.”

“Jesus,” Stiles says. “You went and killed everyone I found for you. You used me, you bastard.”

“I did indeed,” Deucalion says. “Why the sudden moral qualms? They deserved to die. You know it. You didn’t have a problem when your precious Uncle Peter tore out Kate Argent’s throat.”

“That’s because Kate was an immediate danger,” Stiles says. “To me and to my pack, my family. These people – they should have faced justice. That’s why I was doing the cases for you, Duke. Not because I wanted to help you get revenge on people who in all likelihood had nothing to do with what happened to you!”

Deucalion shrugs. “Well, as the great Mick Jagger said, we can’t always get what we want.” He smiles at Stiles. “But you did help me, and you’ve been very helpful today, so do you know what? I think I’ll give you something.”

“Don’t do me any favors, jackass,” Stiles grits out.

“I’m going to let you choose who lives and who dies,” Deucalion says, and Stiles feels his stomach go cold. “You and your pack have caused me a lot of trouble. I might have to delay implementation while I get it all sorted out, and that’s a problem for me. So I’m going to kill . . . precisely half of your pack. And you’re going to choose which half.”

“I can’t – I can’t do that,” Stiles says.

“Yes, you can,” Deucalion says. “I’ll spare the children, of course. I’m not a monster. But as for the rest – well, Peter will have to go, he’s too dangerous, but I’ll leave the rest up to you. Talia or Aaron?”

“I won’t choose,” Stiles says. “I won’t, I can’t.”

Deucalion presses his foot into Derek’s abdomen. Derek growls and grabs him by the ankle, trying to wrestle his way free. Deucalion pulls his foot free and kicks Derek in the ribs. He gives a choked noise but keeps struggling. “Choose, Stiles,” Deucalion growls, kicking Derek again. “Before I have to subdue him. Who dies?”


“Very good. Laura or her mate?”

“J-Jonathan,” Stiles says. “Because the kids – the kids need their mother, I know what it’s like to lose a mother, and I –”

“Shut up,” Deucalion says, dashing Stiles’ last attempt to stall. He grinds his foot down on Derek’s stomach. “Cora or her new young man?”

“Cora,” Stiles says, wiping tears off her cheeks. “She’s gone through too much, I don’t think she could –”

“Those two young lovebirds, I don’t know their names.”

“Allison,” Stiles says, glad that nobody besides Derek is here to hear this. “Scott’s my brother, you can’t –”
“And last but not least,” Deucalion says, “you or Derek? You can choose, Stiles. Would you rather I kill him? Put him out of his misery? Or can you not bear the thought of his death, of living without him? I know that I couldn’t have, if anyone had asked me about my blessed Liesel. So which would you rather, Stiles?”

Stiles feels his stomach churn. His lungs clamp down, his throat closes, like they’re not going to let the answer escape, like they can’t let the words be known. He feels cold all over, but it’s not the cold from fear. It’s the cold that comes from rage. He meets Derek’s gaze, but the words are directed to Deucalion. “Kill Derek,” he says, and there’s something like relief in his mate’s eyes. “Because I want to live long enough to destroy you afterwards, Duke, and you’re making a very big mistake if you think that I won’t.”

“Whatever you say,” Deucalion says, and he lifts his foot again, and Stiles knows what’s going to happen, knows that he’s going to slam his foot back down and break half of Derek’s ribs in the process, and he doesn’t stop to think. He just leaps on Deucalion, knocking him back a step. It doesn’t have much effect, but it gives Derek time to roll and stagger to his feet. Deucalion flings Stiles backwards, into Derek, and they both go down in a heap.

Stiles has just managed to get to his hands and knees when the front window shatters and something lands on the floor. Without thinking, he throws himself to the floor and covers Derek’s body with his own. The grenade goes off with a bang and sends up smoke everywhere. The smell is acrid and intense even to his poor human nose. He strips his T-shirt over his head and presses it against Derek’s face.

Deucalion is coughing and gagging, and he doesn’t even see it coming when Peter kicks down the door and tackles him. Stiles has seen Peter fight before, too, and this isn’t anything like usual. He seems stronger and faster. He thinks back to Peter having a drug for everything and wonders if this is something else from his arsenal.

Whatever it is, it can’t stand up to Deucalion. He recovers from the bitter stench and throws Peter across the room. Peter just bounces off the wall and comes back twice as hard. Stiles sees through the smoke that he’s holding something in his hand. It looks like a syringe. “Stiles, take Derek and get out of here!” Peter shouts at him, and Stiles starts trying to drag Derek to his feet as Derek scrambles upright but then nearly collapses back to the floor. He wonders why Peter isn’t being accompanied by the entire National Guard, but figures he can ask later.

They’re almost to the door when Deucalion picks up one of the dining room chairs and slams it into Peter’s midsection. Peter goes flying and hits the front wall hard; Stiles can practically hear the air being knocked out of him. Deucalion springs forward, and in that moment Stiles doesn’t even think, he just lets Derek go and jumps in between Peter and Deucalion with both arms up to protect his throat and his face. As a fighting move goes, it’s not much of one. He’s knocked backwards, into Peter, and feels sharp pain as Deucalion’s jaws sink down into his arm.

Peter’s arm comes down over his shoulder and he almost manages to stab the syringe into Deucalion. Then the alpha snarls and knocks his hand aside. Stiles hears the cracking of bones, and the syringe flies out of Peter’s hand and across the room.

“Get down!” Peter shouts, and punctuates this with a shove. Stiles winds up in a heap on the floor as Peter dives after the lost weapon. Deucalion is right there on top of him, and they roll around for a minute until Deucalion gets his arm around Peter’s throat.

“All your tricks, all your toys, they won’t help you against me,” Deucalion snarls. Peter claws at his arm, his entire body writhing and thrashing in Deucalion’s grip. “You have no idea what I am, what I’m capable of. I’m the alpha of alphas! I am the apex predator! I am the demon wolf!” he
shouts, and that’s when Stiles slams the syringe down into his back and pushes the plunger all the way down.

Deucalion’s entire body spasms. His arm locks around Peter’s throat even tighter. He’s going from red to purple, and still struggling desperately. Stiles tries to pull Deucalion off, tugging on the alpha’s arm with all of his strength. It makes no difference. Then Derek is there, adding his strength. Deucalion’s arm bends backwards with a crack, and Peter gasps for air and manages to squirm free.

Stiles lets go of Deucalion and scoots backwards on his ass, not even caring about how stupid it looks but just wanting to get away from him. Deucalion’s not a danger anymore, though. He’s convulsing so hard that it looks like something from The Exorcist. “What was in that syringe?” Stiles gasps out. “Wolfsbane?”

Peter shakes his head and croaks out, “Silver nitrate.”

“Jesus,” Stiles says, collapsing against Derek. They just sit there and breathe hard for a few moments. Stiles is sure that there’s something that they should be doing, but whatever it is, it’s not coming to mind.

Deucalion gives a final shudder and then goes still. Stiles wonders if they should check a pulse, then remembers that werewolves can hear heartbeats, so it’s probably unnecessary. Then Peter manages to get to his feet and says, “Stiles, you don’t need to watch this.”

“What are you doing?” Stiles asks, as Peter walks over to Deucalion.

“Making sure it’s done,” Peter says. Stiles decides that he agrees with Peter, and leans against Derek’s shoulder. He doesn’t want to know how Peter plans to remove Deucalion’s head from his shoulders, and he doesn’t want to know.

“Are you okay?” he asks Derek. “I mean, obviously your arm is broken and your throat is all clawed up and I think your ribs might be fractured but . . .”

“I’m okay,” Derek says, rubbing a hand over his hair. “And you . . .”

“I’m fine,” Stiles says.

“He kicked you around pretty good.” Derek looks down as if to survey Stiles’ injuries. Then he goes completely still, his eyes wide. “We need to get you to a hospital. Now.”

“I . . . what?” Stiles says. He follows Derek’s gaze down to the bite wound on his arm. The bite from Deucalion. The bite that’s now leaking black bile, dripping onto the floor one drop at a time.

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Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

So I try to be as accurate as possible with my medical stuff in general, but I just want to let you know that I took a lot of liberties with some stuff here. I'm pretty sure that actual immuno-suppression therapy is nowhere near this dramatic, LOL.

I know it's been a while since the whole 'bite rejection' thing was talked about in the fic, so if you want to refresh your memory, it's discussed in detail in chapter 10. =D

Derek feels his heart slam around his ribcage as soon as he sees the black liquid oozing from Stiles’ arm. “We need to get you to a hospital. Now,” he says, and while Stiles is still trying to figure out what’s going on, Derek gets to his feet. He tries to pick Stiles up but then nearly drops him as he remembers that just about every bone in his left arm is broken. “Uncle Peter!”

Peter’s head jerks around as he hears the note in Derek’s voice. His gaze zeroes in on the bite wound like a laser, and he snarls, “Fuck.” He grabs Stiles and runs to the car. He’s brought Derek’s, which Derek is grateful for. The Camaro is faster than any of the other vehicles they own, barring maybe Sheriff Stilinski’s cruiser.

Derek is in the back and has Stiles belted in the front passenger seat before the teenager can even process what’s happening. Moments later, Peter’s taken off down the road like a shot. Stiles is still staring at his arm in horror. Then he looks up, twists around to face Derek. “W-Why?” he asks, and Derek grits his teeth against the raw fear in Stiles’ voice.

“There’s no way to know,” he says, trying to stay calm. “Nobody’s really sure why bite rejection happens, remember?”

Stiles presses his hand over his mouth. For a minute it looks like he might be sick. Then he pulls himself together. “Where’s everyone else?” he asks. “Why did you come alone?”

Peter shakes his head a little, taking a curve on two wheels. “The only voice I heard on the phone call was yours. So I knew where you were. But not Derek. Not your father.” He takes a breath and fights to keep his voice steady. “Since we only knew that Deucalion was onto us, we split up. I came to get you. Talia went to your house to check on your father and Derek. For all we knew, they were still there, maybe hurt. Aaron went to make sure Cora and the others were all right and were protected.”

“My dad’s okay?” Stiles asks.

“Your father’s fine, Stiles,” Peter says. “Talia called me just before I got here. He’s pissed as all hell and plenty worried about you – in fact – you’d better call one of them.”

“I will,” Derek says. He’s in a lot of pain, but coherent, and he doesn’t want anybody to panic if they hear Stiles’ voice. He accepts the phone that Peter tosses over the seat at him, and dials his mother. She picks up a moment later, sounding frantic. “Mom, it’s me,” he says, cutting off her greeting. “We – we’re okay, just beat to shit.”
“All of you?” she demands.

“Yeah.” He’ll tell her about the bite rejection in person, not over the phone. “Peter’s driving us to the hospital. We’ll meet you there, okay?”

“Yes.” Talia lets out a breath. “Oh – ” He hears her talking to someone else in the background. “Tom wants to talk to Stiles.”

“Uh, sure,” Derek says, knowing he can’t refuse. He hands the phone over the seat.

“H-Hey Dad,” Stiles says, in a shaking voice.

“Are you all right?” Tom demands, loud enough that Derek can hear him clear as day.

“I’m pretty . . . I’m not in the best shape I’ve ever been, but I’m gonna be fine,” Stiles says. “Peter rescued us, it was so badass, he . . .” Stiles chokes on a sob. “He’s driving us to the hospital now, so I’ll see you there.”

It’s obvious from the tone of Tom’s voice that he knows something is very wrong. But he says, “Yeah, okay,” and hangs up. Peter’s on Route 70 now, and doing about ninety miles per hour.

Stiles clutches at the phone. He looks back at Derek and says, “I’m gonna be fine, right?”

“You’re going to be sicker than a dog and probably wish you were dead,” Peter answers, his voice still calm and even. “But yes, you’re going to be fine. Do you know why? Because I’m not going to deal with your father if you’re not fine.”

Stiles lets out a weak laugh. It’s wobbly, but genuine. Then he closes his eyes and seems to focus most of his attention on not having a panic attack. A trickle of black liquid comes from the corner of his mouth, and he wipes it away absently.

The drive between the house in the woods and Beacon Hills should take about twenty minutes, Derek knows. Peter had made it in sixteen on his way to rescue them. Now he makes it in fourteen.
He comes to a halt right in front of the emergency room entrance in a screech of burned rubber. He’s over the hood of the car and yanking Stiles out of the passenger seat almost before Derek can get himself unbuckled.

The nurse at the desk isn’t Melissa, but she clearly knows what she’s doing. Peter slams everyone else out of their way, shoves Stiles up against the desk, and says, “Bite rejection,” and the nurse reacts as though he’d dropped a bomb. She grabs her phone and shouts into it, and bare moments later, two people are ushering Stiles through a set of doors.

Derek tries to shove after them, but an orderly gets in his way. “Sorry, but you can’t – ”

“That’s my mate, I have to – ”

Peter gets an arm around Derek’s chest. “No, Derek. They have to put him in a clean room, suppress his immune system. Nobody goes with him. Not even you.”

Derek whines in frustration, but after a moment, he subsides. Peter gently guides him back to the front desk. “His arm is broken,” he says. “There are probably other injuries as well,” he adds, and the nurse nods and starts asking questions, and Derek tries to answer them, but all he can do is stare in the direction that Stiles has gone.
From an intellectual standpoint, Stiles is fairly sure that he’s going to find this all pretty fascinating someday. He’s read so much about bite rejection at this point that it’s interesting to see it in action. He’s been in the emergency room less than one minute before he gets his first injection. “That was a corticosteroid, it’s the first of the immunosuppressants,” the doctor tells him, and then he’s in a wheelchair and being pushed into another room. Two minutes later he’s on a bed with an IV in his arm and they’re administering another drug, cyclo-something. He’s read about it, but can’t remember the name.

“Where’s my dad?” he asks, grabbing at one of the nurses and hoping he doesn’t sound as pitiful as he knows he does.

“Honey, nobody can come with you,” she says, squeezing his hand. “We have to completely shut down your immune system and put you in a sterile room, okay?”

Stiles nods, because what else can he do? It’s not okay. It’s not okay at all. He’s alone and scared and he wants his dad and he wants Derek. But he just nods and then looks up as the doctor comes in. “Okay, Stiles,” he says, and his voice is mellow and calm and Stiles is a little less freaked out. “This is going to be the most miserable seventy-two hours of your life. You’re going to have a high fever and the shakes. You’re going to want to throw up. You’re going to be exhausted and barely able to move. If you want, we can put you into a medically-induced coma. A lot of people prefer that.”

“No,” Stiles says, shaking his head. The idea of being asleep is even more terrifying than anything else. If he dies, he wants to know, God damn it.

“Okay. Ready for drug number three?” the doctor asks, as if he has a choice, and then puts it into the IV. This one burns going in. “You’re actually pretty lucky, though.”

“Lucky how?” Stiles asks, trying not to fall apart.

“The full moon is in three days,” the doctor says. “That means we only need to keep you fully suppressed that long. I saw one poor bastard in med school that got bitten the day after the full moon. Had to keep him isolated and immunocompromised for twenty-seven entire days. So it could be a lot worse.”

Stiles nods and starts to breathe again. Three days. He can handle three days. He was sick longer than that when he had mono in seventh grade. Of course, he thinks he recalls that the isolation continues a week longer while they wait for the immune system to come back online. But still, anything is better than nothing. “Okay, I’m okay,” he says. He got to the hospital less than thirty minutes after the bite. That puts his survival chance at ninety-five percent. He knows this. He’s done all the research.

“You just sit tight here for a few minutes,” the doctor says, hurrying out.

Stiles does his best. He’s twitchy and shaky for a million reasons. Fortunately, less than a minute has gone by before Melissa comes in. “Hey, you,” she says. “Rough day?”

“Not my best,” Stiles says, “though to be fair, not my worst.”

Melissa smiles warmly at him, like this is just a regular day at a picnic and there’s no reason for alarm or concern at all. His nerves start to dial down a few notches. “Okay, bucko, let’s move.”
She starts rolling his wheelchair down the hall. They go around two corners and then into an elevator, where they go to the third floor.

Then they’re in a tiny hallway that leads into another room. There’s some shelving with plastic bags full of sterile gloves and surgical caps and masks. Off to one side there’s a shower head and a drain in the floor. Melissa gestures for Stiles to go in and says, “Strip, and then scrub.”

Stiles nods and does as he’s told. He knows how it works, knows that humans carry all sorts of germs on them. If he has staphylococcus aureus on his clothes, in two hours it could kill him. He turns the little shower on and starts rubbing the soap all over his body. He’s starting to feel a little dizzy and he wants to get it over with. He’s beyond embarrassment.

After the shower, he gets dried off by what seems like a small tornado. The hot air vented from the ceiling whips around him and he’s dry in less than a minute. But he’s still shivering as he goes through the plastic sheet and into the sterile room. There’s a hospital gown on the bed, in a plastic bag. He opens it and puts it on, then crawls under the covers. He’s already starting to feel miserable.

Twenty minutes later, Melissa unzips the plastic and comes in. She’s wearing gloves and a surgical mask and cap. “One more medication,” she says. “It’s a preventative antibiotic.” She gets equipment for a new IV and starts it in the other arm.

Stiles reaches out and squeezes her hand. “I’m going to be okay,” he says, finding, somehow, firm conviction to put in his voice.

Melissa squeezes back. “Of course you are.”

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Peter’s just seen Derek off to the x-ray and reassured the fourth nurse that he’s fine, really – he’s fairly sure his ribs are cracked but he’s all right; he knows the bruising is bad but if his windpipe hasn’t closed off by now, it won’t – when he hears two familiar heartbeats approach. He looks up to see Tom and Talía shoving their way towards him. “I thought you would beat me here,” he greets them. Talía looks frantic but fine. Tom is all right, although one side of his face is darkly bruised, his eye swollen nearly shut.

“Tom was duct taped to his banister,” Talía says. “It took some time to get him free. Where are Derek and Stiles?”

“Derek’s being taken to get an x-ray for his broken arm,” Peter says. “Stiles is being seen to as well.” There’s no gentle way to put this, nothing that will make it better, so he continues in a calm, clinical tone. “There was a fight. Duke bit him. It didn’t take.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Talía says, sinking into the nearest chair.

“He rejected it?” Tom asks, his voice going up several notches in alarm. “Where is he, I want to see him – ”

Peter grabs Tom by the elbow. “You can’t, Tom. He has to be taken into a sterile environment. They’re going to give him a truckload of immune suppressants.”
“Shit,” Tom says. He seems somewhat at a loss, because he just repeats it. “Shit.”

“He’s going to be okay.” Peter says. “I got him here as quickly as I could. I think it was only about twenty minutes. And the hospital here is very good, they knew exactly what to do. The full moon is only a few days away, which lowers the chances of complications considerably. He’s going to be very, very sick until then, but he’ll make it.”


Talia looks up at this, obviously concerned about her brother and the ring of dark bruises around his neck, the swelling on one side of his face. But Peter answers smoothly. “We got into a fight. I won.”

After a moment, Tom gives a snort of laughter. “Yeah, I’ll just bet you did.”

“Is there anything we need to take care of?” Talia asks quietly.

“No. He brought them to that house in the woods.” Peter rubs a hand at his throat absently. “I’ll need to do some cleanup, but it won’t be an issue right away. This is, of course, presuming that the Druids don’t interfere . . . but I doubt they will, to be honest. As far as I can tell, they’ll be glad to be rid of Deucalion’s insanity. Everyone else involved was far more concerned with the profitability of this venture. Duke was the only one who simply wanted to burn down the world.”

Talia nods, then says briskly, “I’m going to go find Derek and stay with him. You two will be all right?” she asks, and both men nod. “I’ve called Aaron and Laura. They’re going to stay where they’re at for now, but they probably wouldn’t mind an update, since all I could tell them was that you were on your way to the hospital.”

“I’ll talk to them,” Peter says. Talia hurries away, and Peter takes out his phone and starts texting. He’s glad that he can rely on Aaron and Laura to be rational, because the idea of the rest of the pack swarming the hospital is exhausting. He suspects that if he mentions the bite rejection, Cora and Scott will swarm anyway. So he uses his facts sparingly, saying only that Derek and Stiles had both been injured in the fight with Deucalion and were being treated at the hospital, but neither of them were in serious danger.

Tom begins to pace back and forth. After a few minutes, he sees Peter rubbing at his neck again and says, “Shouldn’t you see a doctor? You could get some painkillers or something.”

“I’ll be fine,” Peter says. “I took something from my own supplies.”

“Okay.” Tom continues to pace. It’s obvious that not being able to see Stiles is going to drive him insane. “You’re sure Stiles is okay?”

Peter looks up. “I think he’s going to be,” he says. It isn’t the most reassuring thing in the world, but he’d rather be honest than anything else. He hesitates, then says somewhat awkwardly, “Don’t blame yourself for this, Tom. Deucalion was an alpha. You couldn’t have stopped him. This was my fault. I should have suspected that Deucalion might go after him, should have kept Stiles at the house with me.”

“Maybe we should just both agree that it’s Deucalion’s fault,” Tom says dryly.

“Mm. I suppose that’s a reasonable conclusion. I’m stunned that Duke didn’t think to take Stiles’ phone, though. That’s the first thing I would have done.”
“He did, though,” Tom says. “Or at least he took a phone from Stiles.”

Peter frowns, and then nods in sudden understanding. “He still had Isaac’s, then. That’s what he gave to Deucalion. Smart.”

“That’s my son,” Tom says. Peter opens one eye, and finds himself smiling, although he couldn’t really say why.

He thinks he dozes off for a while. Certainly the world goes a little fuzzy around him. The painkillers he had taken were strong, and he hadn’t slept very well in days. Tom sits down next to him, occasionally gets up to pace, but doesn’t disturb him. It’s not until someone says his name that he opens his eyes again.

“Peter Hale?” the voice says, and both Peter and Tom look up to see a uniformed police officer approaching them.

Peter gets to his feet. “Yes?”

The man smirks at him. “I’m Lieutenant Danbury from the Santa Rosa PD. I’m going to have to take you in.”

“What for?” Peter asks. His voice comes out calm, too calm, edge of hysteria calm.

“You violated your parole. At 11:37 this morning, you left Beacon Hills. You didn’t return until 12:08 PM.”

Peter grinds his teeth. “You folks must have nothing to do down there. Is all the crime in Santa Rosa solved? Do you just sit around and watch my GPS tracker? I had very good reasons to leave Beacon Hills. My nephew was in danger.”

“You can explain that to the judge, buddy,” Danbury says, smirking even wider. He takes out a pair of handcuffs.

Peter feels irrational fear start to choke him. He can’t go back to that prison. He won’t go back, not to that dark room with nothing to do and no pack to comfort him when he thought of Olivia and no scents but mountain ash and stone and steel. He knows his eyes are starting to gleam blue, but he can’t control it, can’t stop it. In a minute he’s going to do something very stupid, and nobody is going to be able to stop him.

That’s what he thinks, but then Tom is between them, his arms folded over his chest, and he says, “If you lay a hand on him, I’ll have you charged with assault.”

Danbury’s eyes narrow. “Interfering with an arrest –”

“Oh, no, I’m not going to interfere with an arrest,” Tom says. “I’m going to facilitate one. Yours.”

“What are you talking about?” Danbury sneers.

Tom takes out his badge and holds it up. “Sheriff Tom Stilinski. And you, my friend, are under arrest for perjury, obstruction of justice, accepting bribes, and probably a fair number of other things by the time a DA who isn’t on the take gets through with you.”

“You – you can’t –”

“Oh, I can,” Tom says. “I have a warrant and everything. I have proof in the form of your bank
account and your gambling bills. The only reason you hadn’t already been arrested was because I
had some other pressing business to take care of first, like a psychotic alpha and my son being
hospitalized. But I’ve already called two of my deputies, and they’re on their way down to bring
you to the station.”

“But he – Hale wasn’t –”

“You know damned well that Peter isn’t guilty of anything,” Tom continues relentlessly, “and the
fact that you decided to come up here and bully him is only going to result in some harassment
charges being added to the mix. And you know what? If you’ve got the key to that anklet on you,
you’d better hand it over. It might make me a little more inclined to interrogate you sometime
today instead of leaving you in holding to sweat out the twenty-four hours we have to bring
charges, while I tell all your buddies that you’re about to spill the beans and see if they’ll roll on
you first.”

“I would need a judge’s order to –”

“To what? Release a man that you know to be innocent from custody? A man against whom
charges should never have been brought? Okay, suit yourself. The cells in Beacon Hills are pretty
nice. Parrish might think to bring you water now and then while you wait. He’s a smart guy.”

“Fine, Jesus Christ!” Danbury pulls a ring of keys off his belt and shuffles around until he finds
one. He tries to offer it to Tom, but the sheriff just points. He kneels down and unlocks the anklet,
taking it off Peter’s leg. Peter gives a little shudder as it comes free. Then Danbury is on his feet
again, and Parrish and his partner are approaching. Minutes later, he’s in handcuffs and being led
away, still protesting about how unfair it is.

Tom shakes his head a little and says, mostly to himself, “Asshole.”

“Thank you.” Peter gives another shudder, leaning forward to rest his forehead against Tom’s
shoulder. “Tom. Thank you.”

Tom blinks in some surprise, then awkwardly pats Peter’s back. “Yeah, no problem,” he says. He
sees that Peter is a little shaky, and gets him sitting down again. Conversely, Tom seems to have
calmed down some. That makes sense to Peter. He was finally able to do something, even if it
wasn’t related to his primary concern. Tom is a lot like Stiles in some ways; he chafes at inaction.

Another fifteen minutes go by before they’re approached by a nurse who says, “Sheriff Stilinski?
We’ve got your son settled in a room and you can come see him now, though you can’t be allowed
in.”

Tom nods and lets out a breath of relief. “You coming?” he asks Peter, who nods and gets to his
feet.

“Any idea where Talia and Derek are?” he asks the nurse.

She checks her watch and says, “About ten minutes ago, they were just taking Derek to get the cast
put on. It was a complex fracture, so they had to wait for the swelling to go down first.”

Tom glances at Peter as they follow the nurse down the hall. “Must be rough on werewolves when
they actually get injured. They’re not used to it.”

“It happens,” Peter says, with a slight shrug. “It won’t be Derek’s first hospital stay.”

Tom sighs and falls silent. The hallway they go down is eerily quiet, and Peter finds himself
somewhat uncomfortable as they head down it. Of course, he knows that there’s some isolation involved, and he supposes it’s a good thing that the other rooms in this area aren’t occupied. “Here we are,” the nurse says, coming to a halt. There’s a tall woman standing there in a lab coat; she shakes Tom’s hand and introduces herself as Dr. Rana.

The setup is interesting, Peter notes, as she leads them into Stiles’ room. The door opens into what’s actually a tiny hallway, barely wider than the door itself. Directly ahead, about five feet away, is another doorway sealed with heavy, clear plastic. It has a zippered entrance. Beyond the plastic, Stiles is tucked into the bed inside and clearly sound asleep. That doesn’t surprise Peter. He had had a hell of a long morning, and he’s sure that the drug cocktail packs a significant punch. He watches the teenager’s chest rise and fall, slow and steady. That reassures him, although the lack of scent from someone so close is somewhat discomfiting.

To the left of the door into Stiles’ room-within-a-room is another door made from glass panels and metal framing. Dr. Rana ushers them through this door and they find themselves in a five-foot wide area that surrounds Stiles’ isolated chamber on three sides. More panes of glass separate them from Stiles, and the narrow, U-shaped room holds some medical equipment, a sink, a bureau, several comfortable looking chairs, even a television. To keep the room’s occupant from going insane out of boredom, Peter presumes. Stiles’ room-within-a-room is about eight feet square, and almost entirely empty except for the bed, the monitors, and a toilet with a plastic privacy screen that can be pulled around it.

“How is he?” Tom asks, not looking away from his son.

“He’s doing well,” Dr. Rana said. “Some fever, but nothing severe. He complained of some nausea but then he fell asleep after we added an anti-nausea medication. Both of those would be expected side effects of the immunosuppressants. Certainly, he’s not showing any signs of danger from the rejection itself. No seizures, no difficulty breathing. The wound has stopped excreting, which is a good sign.”


Dr. Rana nods encouragingly. “At this point, barring any complications such as infection, I’d say his prognosis is good. Now, you’re aware of the restrictions . . . let me tell you a little bit about the timeline for recovery . . .”

Peter stops listening as he watches Stiles breathe. The teenager’s face is turned to one side, and his cheeks are a bit flushed from the fever, but he looks relaxed. Innocent and childlike. Peter turns away. He curls up in one of the chairs in the outer room, and falls asleep.

~ ~ ~ ~
Derek feels slow and stupid, numbed by pain and painkillers, by the time the doctors clear him to be released. His arm is in a cast and then in a sling. It was broken in three places in addition to being dislocated. The scratches on his throat have been disinfected. Two of them required stitches. Talia had stayed with him while all of this was done. At first he was twitchy, but he grew increasingly tired and listless as the minutes dragged on.

“Come on, Derek,” Talia says quietly. “Let’s get you a cool drink and then we’ll take you to see Stiles. Okay?”

Derek nods a little and pushes his good hand through his hair. There’s a part of him that is desperate to see Stiles. But the logical part of him knows that there will be a glass wall between him and his mate, and that’s going to make him want to scream. He can’t decide what would be worse, so he’ll follow his mother’s lead.

The doctor is gone when they get there. Peter is asleep in the corner. Tom is sitting beside the glass wall that separates them from Stiles. Derek’s gaze snaps over to where the teenager is lying in bed. His eyes are open now, and Talia has to grab Derek before he can plaster himself up against the glass. “Stiles,” he says, and it’s more of a whine.

“Hey,” Stiles rasps. Derek can’t actually hear him, but can see the movement of his mouth. His eyes are a little glazed over, cheeks flushed.

“You have to – there’s a little switch for a microphone here,” Tom says, reaching over and pressing a button. “A speaker inside and everything, so you don’t have to shout to be heard through it.”

Derek lets his mother shuffle him into one of the chairs right by the glass wall. He can’t manage to form sentences. He just wants to claw his way through the wall and pull Stiles into his arms. He can barely breathe with the need for it. Talia’s hands on his shoulders become more restraint than reassurance. “Stiles, how are you feeling?” she asks, keeping her voice calm.

“A li’l sick,” Stiles says. It’s obvious that he’s trying to keep up a good front for Derek’s sake. “My head aches and I can barely lift my arms. They said that’s normal, though.”

“Yeah,” Tom says, sliding his hand against the glass. “He’s gonna be okay, Derek.”

“I have to – I need to get in there,” Derek says. “I need to feel him.”

“I’m okay, Derek,” Stiles reiterates. “It’d be boring in here anyway. I just want to get some sleep.”

“Here, this will help,” Tom says, standing up and fishing out a plastic bag that had been tucked underneath his chair. “Melissa saved them for you. They’re kind of bloody, but . . .” He hands the bag to Derek. It contains the clothes that Stiles had been wearing. Derek buries his face in them, inhales Stiles’ scent. It calms him a little, even though the scent is tainted by fear and pain. It’s still Stiles’ scent, which is what matters.

“Why don’t I go get us some drinks?” Talia says, squeezing Derek’s shoulder before she heads for a vending machine down the hallway. He nods a little, not looking away from Stiles. The teenager’s eyelids are drooping, and he seems to have lost track of the conversation.

“It’s only going to be a few days,” Tom says to Derek. “Three days until the full moon, and they say it’s typically three days after that before contact is allowed, depending on how well his
immune system recovers."

“That’s not ‘only a few’,” Derek growls. “That’s nearly a week.”

Tom sighs. “The full moon could be three weeks away rather than three days. Count your blessings.”

Derek blanches at the idea of an entire month without his mate. Then his head snaps up. “Cora’s coming,” he says, and cautiously scents the air. “Dad, too. And Isaac and Scott, I think.” He isn’t as familiar with their scents, can’t be as sure. But he’s right; a few moments later, the crowd of teenagers rounds the corner with Aaron trailing behind them.

“Oh, for the love of – ” Talia says, coming back with three bottles of soda. “I thought – ”

“Sorry,” Aaron says, “I couldn’t keep them there any longer.”

“Stiles!” Scott is the first to notice Stiles in the glassed-off area, and starts forward. Tom stands up, putting an arm in front of him. “What’s wrong with him, is he okay?”

“He’s going to be fine,” Tom says, keeping his voice firm, “but during the struggle Deucalion bit him, and his body rejected it. So they’ve got his immune system suppressed, which is why we can’t be in there with him.”

“Oh,” Scott says. Much to Tom’s relief, the others aren’t as familiar with the effects of bite rejection, so they don’t immediately panic. They take Tom’s word for it that Stiles will be okay, see his lack of fear and relax. He sees Aaron give Talia a concerned look, which Talia returns with a reassuring nod. That takes some of the tension out of Aaron’s shoulders.

“What happened?” Cora asks, her voice a little breathy, as she leans over to nuzzle her cheek against Derek’s hair. He manages a wan smile for her.

“Duke decided to go to the Stilinski house and target Stiles instead of accepting our invitation,” Talia says. “I guess he saw through the ruse, though damned if I know how.”

Derek looks up at this and says, “He didn’t believe that Stiles had really cracked the nursery case. He thought it was just to bait him, that it was too good to be true.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Tom says, clearly annoyed.

“Yeah, Stiles was pretty indignant about that, too,” Derek says, and this time his smile is a little more genuine. But his gaze darts back to where Stiles is stirring restlessly in the bed, clearly half-conscious. “Actually he was downright pissed. But he was able . . .” Derek lets out a few breaths. “He used explaining that as a way to stall. Played up his aphasia to buy time and kept Duke talking until . . . until Peter could get to us.”

Cora blinks, then looks over, just now seeing her uncle asleep in the corner. “Is he okay?” she asks, seeing the bruises on his throat and face.

“Just a little banged up, nothing to worry about,” Talia says soothingly. “Now, I know better than to tell you to go home. But we’re going to stay in the little alcove and stay out of the hospital staff’s way, all right?”

“Can we talk to him?” Isaac asks.

“There’s a little speaker, yes,” Talia says, “but it looks like he’s fallen asleep so we’re not going to
bother him for now. He’ll be doing a lot of sleeping. They’ve got him on very powerful drugs right now.”

Tom stands up. “Well . . . I hate to leave him, but I have quite a bit of work to do. And I know that you guys will keep an eye on him for me.”

“We’ll keep you updated,” Talia says with a nod. Then she frowns. “What sort of work? Is it about Duke? Did somebody hear a ruckus and call the police?”

“No, nothing like that,” Tom says. “That house was pretty well isolated. But one of the Santa Rosa PD came up here to give Peter some hell about going outside Beacon Hills.” He sees Talia’s jaw tighten. “Now he’s under arrest, and I think he’s had long enough to sweat, so I want to go have a friendly chat with him about exactly how many coworkers of his he can implicate.”

Talia smiles viciously. “Yes, that sounds like an excellent idea.” She offers Tom an embrace, which he accepts, and then he claps a hand down on Derek’s uninjured shoulder. Derek glances up and tries to smile at him.

As soon as he’s gone, Cora sits down on the small sofa next to Derek. “Are you okay?” she asks.

Derek glances up, sees that Stiles is asleep, and shakes his head a little. “No,” he says. “I think I will be later, but right now I just . . . I’m just not.”

“Stiles is gonna be okay, right?” Cora asks anxiously.

“He should be fine,” Talia says, leaning over to rub her daughter’s back. “Yes, there’s a chance of complications, just like with any illness. But he’s probably in less danger now than he was after . . . what happened last summer. So you can relax, okay?”

Derek nods miserably. He wants to just curl up as a wolf and he can’t even do that, not with his arm in a cast and a sling. He won’t be able to do the full shift for weeks, maybe months. He curls up on the sofa anyway, tucking his head into Cora’s lap. She reaches down absently and smooths his hair. He closes his eyes and waits for Stiles to wake up.

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For Stiles, the next few days pass in a blur of pain and fatigue. He can barely move, and hardly ever wants to. His head and his joints ache constantly. Sometimes he’s freezing, huddled up underneath the covers. Other times he’s so hot that he just flings all off his clothes, uncaring of who might be on the outside, watching. He can’t eat and is allowed to drink only water, but he’s so nauseous that he doesn’t even care.

He’s peripherally aware of the things going on outside. Someone brings in a stereo and puts on some of his favorite music. Derek gets in an argument with one of the nurses because he brought Stiles some ginger tea, hoping it would help with the nausea, but the nurse won’t bring it in. Scott and Isaac tell him all about the season’s final lacrosse game.

The doctor comes in twice a day, and the nurses a little more frequently. But even they don’t come in very often. “Minimal contact” was advised, Melissa had told him at the beginning. Sure, the doctors washed up and put on clean scrubs and masks before going in, but every bit of contact put him at risk for infection. They only came in to administer his medication. The rest of the
monitoring was done by machines.

Sometimes he has brief periods of feeling okay, or at least coherent and wanting to distract himself from the nausea and pain. The pack is always ready to help, putting on a movie or sitting right up next to the glass wall so they could play cards or board games. Sometimes they’ll read him his e-mails or posts on the WLO’s victim forum. His hospitalization isn’t national news this time; Talia and Tom are both trying to keep Stiles out of the limelight as much as possible. As far as they’re concerned, if the general public never finds out about Deucalion’s scheme, it’ll be so much the better.

Other times he’s just so miserable that he’ll curl up right against the glass and lean his cheek against it so he’s as close to Derek as he could get. Derek sits on the other side of the glass and presses his hands against it. It’s kind of pathetic, Stiles knows that, but it’s the only comfort he can get, and he’ll take it. Sometimes, when he’s tossing and turning late at night, he hears a woman singing. Talia, who sings him lullabies like his mother did, to help him through the worst of it.

He surfaces from what felt like a long period of sleep, feeling nauseous and headachy but better than he had been. It’s surprisingly quiet. He’s gotten used to the muffled noise coming through the glass, or the strangely amplified echoes of the speaker that transmitted the pack’s words or the music to him. Now it’s completely quiet. He fumbles for the button that inclines his bed and tries to look around.

His father is sitting in his usual chair by Stiles’ bed, flipping through a well-used paperback, but he’s the only one there. “Hey,” Stiles rasps, and Tom looks up. He wishes he could have a drink. “Where’s everybody?”

“It’s the full moon,” Tom says, glancing at his watch. “It’s just past eleven. The pack left a couple hours ago.”

“Ooooh,” Stiles says, blinking slowly. He sinks back against the pillows, giving himself a few minutes for his head to clear. The cobwebby feeling always persisted for a little while after he woke. “Hey, that’s cool. Tomorrow I get visitors?”

“No,” his father says patiently. “Tomorrow the immunosuppressants are stopped. You get your last dose in about . . .” He checks his watch. “Two hours. That’ll hold you through the moon setting. And then there will be three more days of isolation. But even though you won’t have visitors, at least you’ll start to feel better.”

“Can’t say no to that,” Stiles says. “I feel okay now, though. Just a little nauseous.”

“That’s good,” his father says. “How’s your head?”

“Aches, but not too bad. The nausea’s worse.”

“You want me to call the nurse?”

“No, I just . . . distract me? I’m pretty clear-headed. I know it’s late, but . . .”

“But nothing, bucko,” Tom says, folding his book and putting it aside. “What do you want to talk about? Or would you rather I break out the Trivial Pursuit? Because let me tell you, even with a fever of a hundred plus, you still kick my ass at that game.”

Stiles laughs a little. “No. What happened in Santa Rosa?”

A satisfied smile touches Tom’s face. “Well, it isn’t all ironed out yet, but Lieutenant Danbury
rolled pretty hard on the entire scheme. Apparently the sheriff down there was planning to run for Congress next year, and had been promised financial backing. There were some political favors being exchanged. A whole bunch of people came up dirty, they’re all being indicted, they’re all screaming at me about how I possibly could have gotten that information and they’re really angry that it was submitted anonymously and is therefore admissible as hell.”

“Swear jar,” Stiles says, smirking at his father, who gives him an unimpressed look. “No, that . . . that’s awesome. Really. How’s Peter?”

“He’s okay. Recovering. You know how he is.” Tom shrugs. “I thought he might kiss me when I got that anklet off him.”

Stiles snorts. “You never know, with Peter.” He drifts for a minute, fighting with the nausea. “What about . . . the mating stuff? Morrell and their backers and everything? I mean, Duke wasn’t working alone. He was going to release the information and try to destroy the Ceremonies wholesale. That would almost be preferable to what the others have in mind.”

“Well,” Tom says, “apparently, only Marin Morrell herself knew the details of the witchcraft that was being used. And now that Deucalion is dead, she won’t work with the others. She says she only did it because she thought it might cure Duke’s madness.” Tom gives a little shrug. “Strange to say, but I think she actually loved him, despite everything.”

“How do we know she won’t go behind our backs and do it anyway?” Stiles asks, skeptically.

“Given that she gave Talia the entire list of their benefactors . . .”

“Oh,” Stiles says, and laughed a little. “So . . . she really wasn’t into it, I guess.”

“She’s . . . a very strange woman,” Tom says, frowning. “I met her twice and I’m still not sure what to make of her. I can’t guess at her motives, but Talia and Peter both seemed satisfied at the conclusion, so I guess we’ll go with it.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. He’s quiet for another minute, thinking. “Hey, Dad . . .? Can I tell you something?”

“So . . . the way I understand it, the whole thing goes, Duke kidnapped us and made me drive him out to the house, where I stalled until Peter showed up, there was a fight, I got bit, Peter killed Duke, and then got me back here. Right?”

“Right,” Tom says, frowning slightly, clearly unsure of why Stiles was telling him what he already knew.

“The thing is, though . . . Peter didn’t kill Deucalion.” Stiles swallows hard. “I did.” His gaze darts nervously over to his father, seeing that his father registers more surprise than anything else. “Peter had a syringe full of silver nitrate, but Duke knocked it out of his hand. I grabbed it and . . . Duke had Peter on the floor, he was choking him, so I stuck the syringe in his shoulder and killed him. I didn’t even think twice about it. I just did it.”

“I don’t know,” Stiles says. “I know we had talked about this stuff. About me not being a killer. And I feel like I should feel bad. But I don’t, not really. He would have killed all three of us. He hurt you, he hurt Derek. I just did what I had to do, that’s all.”
Tom reaches out, clearly forgetting for a minute that he can’t touch Stiles, can’t squeeze his shoulder or hands in reassurance. “That’s okay, Stiles.”

“Is it?” Stiles asks, looking up.

“Yeah,” Tom says. “Am I happy that you had to do it? No. But it was self-defense. I sure as hell wouldn’t be happy if you’d gotten killed and you could have prevented it.” Tom fumbles for words. “There are roads I don’t want to see you go down, that’s sure as hell true. Has Peter ever killed when he didn’t need to? I don’t know, and I’m happier not knowing. But there is a time and a place for the use of lethal force, Stiles. They teach us that at the police academy, too. You have to learn to trust your own judgment. You didn’t think killing Seth was the right thing to do. But you thought that killing Duke was. And you know what? I think you were right both times.”

Stiles tries to smile, but mostly winds up rubbing at his eyes with his knuckles. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Maybe both of us have been looking at this whole Left Hand thing the wrong way,” Tom says. “Derek says you make your own rules, right? So maybe these are the rules that you’re making.”

“Yeah. I’ll think about that.” Stiles sinks back onto the bed. He’s already exhausted again. “Hey, Daddy? Will you read to me?”

“Sure,” Tom says. Stiles remembers him doing that for his mom, in the long days before her death. He picks up his book, a battered John Grisham novel, and starts at the beginning. Stiles is asleep ten minutes later.

But even sick and exhausted, even muffled through the glass walls, he can’t sleep through the pack’s entrance the next morning. There’s only so quiet a pack of werewolves can be, particularly post-full-moon. They’re dirty and excited and Cora has leaves in her hair and Isaac looks like he just had the time of his life. They’ve got a cup of coffee and a bag of donuts for Tom, since he’s been sitting with Stiles all night.

“Oh, God, coffee,” Stiles moans, seeing his father take a drink. Derek’s got a cup of his own. “I want it so baaaaaad,” he says, pressing himself up against the glass and licking at it like he might get coffee through osmosis. Half the pack bursts into giggles.

“You’re feeling better, I see,” Talia says, smiling warmly at him.

Stiles realizes that he is. He’s still got pain lurking in every joint when he moves, and the nausea is still pretty bad. But overall, he definitely feels better. Of course, his body isn’t a three-way battlefield anymore, with the lycanthropy and the immune system and the drugs all fighting each other. Now it’s just a two way battlefield, which is good enough for him. And it’ll be over soon enough. “Yeah, I am,” he says, directing these words mostly at Derek, who’s still staring at him with that brooding expression. “I bet I still look like crap, though,” he adds. He’s glad there are no mirrors anywhere.

“Totally,” Scott says, grinning at him. Stiles flips him off. “No more drugs, though, right?”

“Right,” Stiles says. “I got my last dose a few hours ago. So it should be uphill from here, fingers crossed, et cetera.”

It is. He still can’t have any visitors, but he’s awake and alert now, and feels better with every passing hour. By that evening, the nausea has faded. When he wakes up the next morning, the heaviness in his limbs is gone. He actually got what feels like a good night’s sleep. The pack brings in board games and the complete set of Quantum Leap DVDs. Tom goes to the school and gets a
packet of makeup work for him. Scott, Cora, and Allison sit down with it outside and read him his assignments, talk him through the lessons he’s missed, write down his answers on his worksheets for him.

During all this, Derek sits on the outside of the chamber, but his scowl fades a little day by day. He still clearly wants to get to Stiles, but it doesn’t have the same desperation as it does before. He’s griping about how, since werewolves can’t catch or carry disease, he should be safer than any of the nurses coming and going. Everyone listens to his complaints with affectionate patience.

“You know,” Stiles says, the evening before the precautions will be lifted, “Dad, you and Derek better fight for who gets the first hug now, because you can’t possibly expect me to choose. I’m not even going there.”

Derek blinks at him, then slowly looks at Tom with awkward, hopeless puppy eyes as he says, “You’re his father, so I guess . . .”

Tom shakes his head fondly and says, “Yeah, but I’m not a wolf. I know that this separation has been harder for you than it has been for me. For me, being able to see Stiles and hear his voice, that’s what’s important to me. Obviously I want to give him a hug, but it’s not driving me crazy the way it is you.”

“Thank you,” Derek says in a rush. Stiles laughs a little at Derek and tries not to claw through the glass to get to him.

It’s even more difficult the next morning, when they’re sitting around waiting for the doctor to do his rounds and give Stiles the final okay for visitors. Derek has turned on the television to try to distract them, and they’re watching cartoons. At seven AM, the news comes on, and Stiles is surprised to see what the lead story is.

“Stunning news out of Chicago this morning, where a six-year-old multiple homicide has just been solved,” the news anchor says, staring solemnly into the camera. “In 2007, eleven babies were murdered while still in the nursery at Northwestern Memorial. Multiple suspects were questioned but arrests were never made. The case was noteworthy because all of the babies were born to at least one werewolf parent, and police suspected that an anti-werewolf terrorist organization might be responsible.”

The news anchor goes on to give most of the pertinent facts, saying that sixteen people had been arrested and they had ties back to the WLO and an entire new section of the organization had been uncovered. “And who’s responsible for the breakthrough in this cold case?” she asks, now smiling at the camera. “None other than Przemysław Stilinski, who some of you might remember from last summer when he exposed the WLO in the first place, and became something of a celebrity after he was shot while protecting his pack. Apparently he’s been working on some cold cases where WLO involvement might be suspected.” She turns to her co-anchor and says, “Now, I hear that he’s unavailable for a statement right now because, on top of everything else, he’s currently in the hospital after sustaining injuries on another case he was working on – the murder of Gerard Argent, former head of the WLO.”

“Now that is a kid who doesn’t know when to quit,” the co-anchor says, laughing.

“Ugh, why do they always have to use my real name?” Stiles grumbles. “I know exactly when to quit, assholes. I quit when I’ve won.”

“You should definitely say that on national television,” Scott tells him.
“Maybe I will,” Stiles says, “since apparently I’m famous again. Yuck.” He looks over at his father and says, “So what happened with Gerard’s murder? How did you handle that if you didn’t want Duke’s larger scheme known to the public?”

“How actually, it was pretty easy,” Tom says. “We just tracked it backwards from Peter. The cops down in Santa Rosa were happy to confess to who had been bribing them when it got time cut off their sentences. So they implicated Deucalion, and we had the financial information to link it back to him, and then we found one of Duke’s cronies who testified that he told Duke that Gerard was trying to get the bite to cure his cancer. Deucalion had plenty of motive to kill Gerard without any of the larger schemes, and we just said he framed Peter in a bid to hurt the Hale pack and take over Talia’s territory.”

Stiles nods slowly. “Okay,” he says, and gives a sigh of relief. He’s glad that that’s over. “I really don’t want to do a million more interviews. Maybe I’ll just make another video or something and everyone can survive off that.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Tom says, because Dr. Rana is approaching. She greets them with a smile, washes her hands and opens one of the new packages of sterile scrubs to put on before entering the room’s inner chamber. She does a quick examination while Stiles tries not to fidget, listens to his heart, checks the size of his glands, takes his temperature.

Finally, after what seems like a geological era, she emerges and says, “Okay, now, one at a time, and only for a few minutes. Three visitors maximum. Understood?” she asks, and everyone nods.

“No make-outs?” Stiles asks, looking like he might cry. Dr. Rana just gives him a look. “What if he washes out his mouth with soap? Derek, would you do that for me?”

“Absolutely,” Derek says, already scrubbing his hands all the way up to his elbows. The doctor just rolls her eyes. Derek finishes washing up, opens a new package of scrubs, and puts them on. Dr. Rana unzips the plastic lining, and Derek pushes his way through. Stiles is in his arms before he’s taken more than a step, his legs wrapped around Derek’s waist, clinging to him with all the strength that’s returned to his body. Derek’s got his good arm around his waist and his nose is buried in Stiles’ hair.

Finally, Stiles pulls back enough to press his lips against the blue surgical mask. Derek kisses him back through the thin fabric. It’s not much of a kiss, but it’s better than nothing. Then he rests his temple against Stiles’, still holding him. They haven’t moved when the speaker gives a little crackle and Tom says, “That’s five minutes, kids. My turn.”

Derek reluctantly lets Stiles go. It’s not enough, it’s nowhere near enough. But it won’t be much longer now. He presses another masked kiss into Stiles’ forehead, squeezes his hands, and then departs. Tom is already prepped and waiting to go, and he gets Stiles in one of those back-slapping bear hugs that Stiles loves so much. He gives Stiles a thorough lecture on how amazing he is, and Stiles lectures back on how much fast food he’s undoubtedly been eating.

When his five minutes are up, he gives Stiles’ shoulder a squeeze and goes back through the plastic. Stiles is surprised to see Peter come in. He’s barely seen Peter since the incident at the house. He had come in once or twice, but only briefly. Stiles had asked about him, and Talia had said that Peter found the glass wall very difficult, because he relies so much on scent to maintain his bearings. Of course, the other wolves found it difficult, too, but it bothered Peter more than the others. He doesn’t know if someone called Peter and told him that this was when Stiles would be getting visitors, or if Peter had just kept track on his own and decided to show up.
“Oh, uh, hi,” he says, rubbing a hand over the back of his head. They stand there awkwardly, a few feet away. “How’s your throat and stuff?”

“It’s fine,” Peter says. “I’m sorry that I haven’t been here.”

Stiles shrugs. “You gotta take care of yourself, you know.”

“So it would seem,” Peter says.

“You . . . you’re sure?” Stiles says. “I mean, I don’t want to, to make things harder for you.” He feels tears start to sting at his eyes. “I know that it was selfish of me when I asked you to stay. So, um . . . you can go, if you want. We’ll be okay, I think. We’ll figure it out.”

At this, Peter smiles. His mouth is hidden by the mask, but Stiles can see the corners of his eyes crinkle. “You’re forgetting what I taught you,” he says. “Take whatever someone will give you. Take it without hesitation or shame. I’ll continue to stay, for your sake, for the pack’s sake. And maybe for a little bit of my own sake, too.” Now he reaches out and pulls Stiles into an embrace, rubbing a hand over his hair. “I want to watch you grow, Stiles. I want to see you become a Left Hand that I would have never thought to be. You aren’t my son . . . but you are my nephew, and I love you.”

“Oh,” Stiles says, almost a squeak, and hugs back, hard. “Thanks. I love you, too.”

Peter lets him go, then glances over at the glass, where Derek is pacing back and forth. “I’ll see you back at the house in a few days,” he says, and then goes back through the plastic. He exchanges a few words with Tom while he strips off the hospital gown, and then walks down the hallway.

Stiles shakes his head and says to Derek through the glass, “Uncle P is kinda weird.”

“You don’t say,” Derek says, amused despite himself. He looks over at where Tom is talking to the doctor. She gives them a reassuring nod and then leaves to see to other patients. Derek’s almost immediately scrubbing again, and donning a new set of clean clothes.

“You’re not supposed to be in here,” Stiles says, already nuzzling his face into Derek’s chest.

“I know,” Derek says, “but I can’t not be.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. He makes Derek sit down in the corner and crawls into his lap, pressing his face into Derek’s shoulder, reveling in the warm pressure of Derek’s hand on his back. “Don’t let me fall asleep, okay? I want to savor this.”

“Okay,” Derek says, gathering Stiles into his arms and hugging him for all he’s worth.

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Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Well, here we are! Hopefully this ties up most, if not all, of the loose ends. Plus it has smooches. =D

To people who've been asking if there will be another in this series.... I don't know! I'm not planning one, but then again I wasn't planning to write a sequel to DWS, and we see how that turned out. If I get an idea, I might write more in this 'verse. We shall see....

It’s been almost two weeks since the first time Isaac woke up at the Hale house, and he’s still getting used to it. There’s a brief period of confusion every morning while he processes the fact that he’s warm and comfortable, that his father isn’t shouting at him, that he’s not in any pain. He’s still getting used to all the different senses that come with being a werewolf. He can hear the chirping of birds and the distant sound of traffic, even though the Hale house is at least half a mile from the main road. He can smell the coffee brewing downstairs and the laundry detergent used on the sheets. And Cora. The unique scent that’s just Cora, that he always wants to burrow into. Sometimes he does, and she wakes up smiling.

On this particular morning, she’s already awake. “Morning,” she says, when his eyes blink open. He mumbles a greeting back. “I would’ve gotten up but I didn’t want to wake you.”

She still could have gotten up, and Isaac knows that. It’s not like he’s afraid to wake up in bed by himself. But Cora, well. She’s still extremely antsy about letting him out of her sight for more than a few minutes at a time. The idea of her getting up and going downstairs, making breakfast or watching television without him, isn’t anything that’s going to happen any time soon. They’re already working on getting him transferred to Super High, and when they tried to match his current classes up to ones offered by that school, Cora had said, “He could just take the same classes as me.”

He knows it isn’t healthy, but he doesn’t really mind. It might start to irritate him after a while, but for now everything is new and shiny and if Cora wants to spend every minute of every day with him, he’s not going to complain.

“Guess what,” Cora says, bouncing a little.

“What?” Isaac asks, even though he already knows what she’s going to say.

“Stiles comes home today!” she says, squealing a little.

Lesser men might have been jealous of her excitement. But Isaac’s a werewolf now, he’s pack, and he understands how all this works a lot better than he did two weeks ago. He can feel the bond he has with Cora, and he knows it isn’t going anywhere. There’s no reason to be jealous of Stiles. Cora loves him like a brother – and that’s all.
He wonders if Stiles regrets the fact that he’ll never know the bond the same way. He hadn’t wanted to be a werewolf, true, but now that option is cut off for him forever. Talia had remarked that once the bite has been rejected once, it will always be rejected – and a second bite would be even more dangerous than the first. That means Stiles will never be a werewolf, no matter what happens.

“Would he have rejected it no matter what?” Scott asked on their second day in the hospital, watching Stiles shiver and clutch at his blankets. “I mean, do the circumstances matter?”

“I don’t think anybody knows,” Allison replied, glancing up from her book. “I mean, it’s not like we can know if it would have been different.”

“I think I read somewhere that rejection is more likely if you get the bite from someone other than your own alpha,” Laura said, “but that happens really rarely, so there aren’t a lot of statistics or anything.”

“You mean Stiles might not have rejected it if your mom had bitten him?” Scott asked, and Laura nodded. Scott brooded over this for a minute, watching Stiles. “I can see that. I mean . . . I can see there being a part of Stiles that wouldn’t accept it, not from Deucalion, even if it was only subconscious.”

There was a round of nods at that; everyone seemed in agreement. But Stiles himself thought it was just his previous exposure to wolfsbane that had caused it. He didn’t seem to take the alpha who had given him the bite into consideration at all. And really, they would never know. But in all the complaining he had done, about the drugs, the isolation, the boredom, Isaac hasn’t once heard him complain about the fact that he’ll never be a werewolf.

“Hello, Isaac, earth to Isaac,” Cora says jokingly.

“Oh, sorry, my mind wandered,” Isaac says. “I think I’m still half-asleep. That or I was distracted by how kissable you look.”

“Noooo,” Cora says, laughing as he swoops in. “I have morning breath. Kiss me after I’ve brushed my teeth.”

“I’ll do that, too,” Isaac says, but he kisses her on the forehead instead of on the mouth. Then he rolls out of bed. Cora laughs and heads into the bathroom. A few minutes later, they’re both dressed and ready to go.

“You know, we should go to the grocery store,” Cora says. “We’ve practically eaten everything worth eating in the house, and all Stiles could talk about yesterday was how much he’s going to cook and eat today.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Isaac says. He can’t blame Stiles for that. He’s been living on sealed food that they could be sure no germs had gotten into, and it had to be boring and tasteless as hell.

“I’ll text him and see what he wants,” Cora says, which really means she’ll text Derek and he’ll dictate the replies back to her, since Stiles doesn’t have his phone in the chamber with him. She hums a little as she types in a quick message. Then she starts laughing. “Stiles started kissing the wall when he heard we were offering to go to the store for him. I think he’s excited.”

“Wow,” Isaac says, laughing.

“And, he wants to know what the weather’s like because he might grill and, quote, ‘there’s no windows in this godforsaken place’. And of course Derek has no idea because he’s been living at
the hospital.” Cora goes over to the window and presses her face against it. “Gonna be a warm one today,” she says, tapping at the phone. “Okay, they’re gonna send me a list. Let’s go get breakfast.”

Half an hour later, they’re at the grocery store and Cora is showing Isaac how to tell if different kinds of melons are ripe or not, and they buy enough food for an army.

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“All right, Mr. Stilinski,” Dr. Rana says, unzipping the plastic barrier for the last time. “You’re free.” The words are barely out of her mouth before Stiles has rocketed past her and has his entire body wrapped around Derek like an octopus and his tongue might or might not be in Derek’s mouth. Dr. Rana shakes her head a little, amused, and shakes Sheriff Stilinski’s hand, telling him to take care.

“So why do they always make you sit in a wheelchair and wheel you out of the hospital instead of letting you walk?” Stiles asks Melissa, once he’s finally stopped kissing Derek long enough to sit down.

“Liability,” she says. “They don’t want you tripping and cracking your head open on the pavement. We’d have to readmit you and then where would we be?”

“Here,” Stiles says, smiling cheerfully. She shakes her head at him, then at Derek, who’s trying to wedge his way in and grab Stiles’ hand as they head for the elevator. “Cora said it’s nice out today. Is it nice? I want it to be sunny. I need it to be sunny, you don’t even know, I’ve always been kind of pasty but I think I actually look like a . . . person without color, fuck.”

“Albino,” Derek tells him.

“Right, albino. I look like – ”

“It’s sunny,” Tom says, interrupting him. “It’s sunny and probably going to be in the eighties. It’s basically perfect.”

“Awesome,” Stiles says, feet tapping at the rests until they finally get outside. He springs out of the wheelchair and holds his hands up to the sky. “I feel like Andy in the Shawshank Redemption,” he says.

“He was in prison for nineteen years,” Derek responds automatically.

“Spoilsport,” Stiles says, sticking his tongue out. Derek seizes on it immediately and they wind up kissing for several minutes. Tom just shakes his head and lets them get it out of their system, exchanging a fond look with Melissa.

“C’mon, kids, let’s get you home,” Tom finally says. He’s not surprised when they elect to both sit in the back of the cruiser so they can continue to cuddle, rather than one of them sitting in the front seat. He thinks about making a joke about being their chauffer, but decides against it. Really, they’re too adorable to make fun of. Melissa’s laughing quietly as she gets into the front with Tom. Her shift ended about a half an hour previous.

He sends a quick text to Talia to let them know they’re on their way. It’s just past eleven, and
Despite being a weekday, everyone in the Hale pack is home. The instant Stiles sets foot inside, he’s mobbed. Werewolves are piled up around him in every direction. Tyler is like a miniature hurricane, running in circles before finally clinging to Stiles’ leg. Scott’s thumping a fist on his back and Allison gives him a kiss on the cheek; Talia gives him a hug so tight that she lifts him off his feet (toddler and all).

“You are all awesome and I missed the bejesus out of everyone,” Stiles says, “and I’m going to grill chicken and make fruit salad and ginger molasses cookies and I’m going to cook all the things, it’s going to be great, but for the moment, if none of you mind, I have not had sex with this amazing man,” he pauses here to slap Derek’s chest, “in ten days, and that must be rectified immediately. We’ll be back in a couple hours.”

Laughter comes from every direction and Tom groans and Derek just gets a hand underneath one of Stiles’ thighs, hoisting him off the ground and heading up the stairs. Even with one arm in a sling, as long as Stiles keeps that leg wrapped around his waist, he can support his weight. There’s a few minutes to pause once they’re inside because Stiles has to kiss his laptop and just roll around in the bed to leave his scent all over the sheets. Then Derek pounces, pushing Stiles onto his back on the bed, leaning in for another kiss.

It’s everything that Stiles has ached for, for the last several days. Derek peels him out of the clothes he had literally just put on forty minutes ago, nuzzling against his skin, worshiping every inch of it that he bares. Derek’s arm makes getting his shirt off a little difficult, and it takes both of them, which is really no problem at all for Stiles.

It’s slow and tender, reverent even, and Derek keeps everything sweet and leisurely. He doesn’t let Stiles rush at all. He holds him and touches him until he’s shaking, overwhelmed by it. He whispers into Stiles’ ear, things that would be embarrassing under any other circumstances, about how wonderful he is and how grateful he is to have Stiles. He rocks into him, careful and easy, pressing their foreheads together, breathing into it in perfect sync.

“If absence makes the heart grow fonder . . .” Stiles mumbles when it’s over, “screw it, I still don’t want to ever spend a day away from you again.”

“Good,” Derek says, in a low growl, curling around him protectively.

They finally manage to pry themselves out of the bedroom and get back downstairs. The pack wants to be close to Stiles, so they’re all crowded into the kitchen and dining room. He lets some of them help scoop out the melons and wash the grapes, keeping everyone busy with little tasks while he gets the majority of the work done. He makes cookies because Derek absolutely deserves ginger molasses cookies after everything he’s been through in the past two weeks. He marinates chicken and cooks it on the grill, grills vegetables and makes potato salad and a million other things.

It’s gorgeous outside as long as they stay in the shade, so they eat out in the back yard and stuff their faces. Stiles finds that he’s getting tired a little more easily than expected. He was so full of energy at the beginning of the day, he had expected to be able to keep going late into the night. But as much as the extended rest has bottled up his energy, it’s also taken a toll on his stamina.

They eat fruit salad and drink lemonade and Stiles crawls into Derek’s arm and falls asleep just as the sun is setting.

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Even after Stiles has fallen asleep and Derek has disappeared upstairs with him, the rest of the pack continues to hang out for a while. It’s a school night, so Melissa leaves with Scott and Allison around eight. The others are watching television. Tom helps Talia clean up in the kitchen, updating her on the Santa Rosa situation. She’s talking about filing a suit to get the money confiscated from the bribes sent to the WLO victims’ fund.

“Speaking of which, I haven’t seen your brother for a while,” Tom says, glancing around. He had been there during dinner, but now that he thinks about it, he didn’t really notice when Peter had slipped away. Which is fairly normal for Peter, really.

“Large groups can still be difficult for him,” Talia says.

“Mm,” Tom says. He’s willing to bet that’s not all. He dries his hands off on a dishtowel and says, “I’ll go see if he’s out back.”

He doesn’t see Peter anywhere on the deck or in the backyard. On a hunch, he starts walking through the preserve. It’s past sunset, but there’s still some residual light. He can see easily enough. He’s not surprised to find Peter sitting under the Memorial Tree. Tom hesitates, then sits down next to him. “You okay?”

Peter gives a little shrug. “As usual, I am as okay as I ever am.”

Tom grunts a little, settling himself on the ground. “Stiles told me what you said to him. I wanted to thank you for that.”

“Just the truth.”

“You did sort of lie to me about what happened to Duke,” Tom points out.

“Actually, I didn’t,” Peter says smoothly. “You never asked who killed him. You asked what happened. I said we got into a fight. You all assumed that I was the one who killed him, and you didn’t ask for more details. And I didn’t tell you, because . . . I figured it was up to Stiles, whether he wanted you to know or not.”

Tom sighs. “I guess that’s true. And I appreciate you trying to protect him. And, you know. Saving his life and everything.”

“My pleasure,” Peter says.

They sit in silence for a long time, as the last of the light fades away.

“I miss my wife,” Peter finally says, “but I want to make her proud of me. So I suppose I’m stuck here for the long-term. I don’t think I could have accepted that a year ago. Thank you . . . for helping make the idea a little bit more bearable.”

Tom claps a hand on his back. “No problem. And, you know, it helps me too. To talk about it.” He gets to his feet. “Let’s go have a drink.”

“I was going to stay a little while longer . . .” Peter says, then stands. “But I suppose it can wait for another day.”
Saturday. Date night. Everything is back to normal. Laura and Jonathan are going to a movie. Talia and Aaron have tickets to a play. Stiles and Derek are starting off at the bowling alley with Scott, Allison, Cora, and Isaac, but everyone knows they won’t stay there long. They’ll probably end up at Jungle. Stiles is really, really ready for an hour of grinding and then sex in the Camaro.

Peter is staying home with the kids, and since nobody precisely trusts him to do so properly, Tom has offered to go over as well. He has the night off. Apparently, he and Peter discovered a mutual love of what Stiles calls “boring old movies” and what Tom calls “classic films”, so they’ll keep themselves entertained. Melissa is working night shift, so she says she’ll stay until around nine, when she’ll have to leave. By then, Laura and Jonathan will probably be home anyway, so the kids will be well cared for.

Stiles sits in Derek’s lap and eats cheap Chinese take-out; he bowls a not-at-all perfect one-seventy and then laughs about it. Werewolves have the clear advantage when it comes to bowling, he says, whereupon Allison promptly proves him wrong by winning. She laughs and cheers, her eyes sparkling. They get ice cream and then he and Derek decide to skip Jungle altogether and just proceed straight to sex in the car.

They roll back into the house around eleven. Stiles feels warm and happy, sated in every sort of way. The house is quiet. The kids have been in bed for hours. They find Tom and Talia in the kitchen, drinking coffee and eating the sugar cookies that Stiles had made earlier that day. “Everyone else in bed?” Derek asks, exchanging a quick cheek rub with his mother.

Talia nods. “Well, Peter wandered off in the middle of a sentence, so goodness knows where he is,” she says. “But yes, your father went to bed about half an hour ago, Laura and Jon half an hour before that, et cetera. Cora and Isaac might not be asleep yet. They just got home maybe ten, fifteen minutes ago.” She frowns faintly. “I might have traumatized them.”

“Oh geez,” Stiles says, and he feels confident enough to say, “What’d you do now?”

Talia clears her throat and says, “I might have pulled them aside to discuss the issue of protection. And gave them a box of condoms.”

“Mom!” Derek says, nearly choking.

“What? I didn’t know if either of them would feel confident enough to buy them themselves, and there’s nobody to steal them from in the house. You two don’t need them, I’m on the pill, Laura and Jon are practicing the ‘if it happens, it happens’ method, and my God, if Peter is having sex with anyone I do not need to know about it.” She pauses. “Although, Tom, I suppose I didn’t think to ask you if you had any –”

“Oh my God, stop!” Stiles says, practically crying from laughing so hard. “Dad, don’t you dare answer that question.”

“They’re definitely traumatized,” Derek says, shaking his head.

“Actually,” Tom says, chuckling, “it’s kind of funny to watch Isaac get used to the whole blasé attitude you werewolves display around sex. Because Cora was just like ‘oh, condoms, good thought, Mom’ while he was all bug-eyed in the background.”

“Poor Isaac,” Stiles says with a snort. “I’m going to make myself some tea. Derek?”
“Oh, yeah.” Derek’s metaphorical tail wags. “Honey ginger, please.”

Stiles nods and goes for the kettle. “What’s going on with Isaac’s dad, by the way? He mentioned this evening something about being declared an emancipated minor, but I think I missed a lot of stuff while I was out of commission. Couldn’t we just adopt him or something?”

“Adoption laws are so damned complicated that this was actually easier, and quicker,” Talia says, shaking her head a little. “And the court agreed, since they knew I would look out for him, being his alpha. Lahey’s attorney is one of the public defenders. I know him somewhat, although not well. I’m fairly sure that he’s been trying to get him to enter a plea. Bargain us down from attempted murder by pleading guilty to aggravated assault. But apparently Lahey isn’t going for it. Which means there’s going to be a trial. But it won’t be for a couple months. Isaac will have time to get his feet underneath himself a little before it comes to that.”

Stiles makes a face, putting the kettle on the stove. “That sucks.”

“Agreed,” Talia says. “Speaking of court cases, if you two are planning on being up a little longer . . .?” she asks, and both Derek and Stiles nod. They haven’t exactly talked about it, but Derek knows that, now that Stiles has heard there’s news, he won’t sleep. “First of all, word from Santa Rosa. All charges against Peter have been dropped.”

“That fucking took them long enough,” Stiles says, shaking his head as he gets out two tea bags. Talia sighs in agreement. “Your friend Sarah is being charged with perjury and filing a false report. She’ll probably get a hefty fine and some jail time which will be commuted to time already served. I’ve already let her know that any fine she receives will, of course, be paid for by us.”

Stiles nods, glad to hear that there won’t be any harsh penalties for the woman who had pled guilty to get Peter out of jail. “Okay. That’s good. Tell her I said hi, and thanks, if you talk to her again.”

“Sure.” Talia sips her tea. “Officially . . . Deucalion is missing, presumably on the run since we found out that he had killed Gerard and framed Peter. There are plenty of people who know or at least assume differently, but as long as we don’t say anything about it, then we don’t have to worry about it. And Peter has, of course, assured me that no one will ever be able to prove differently.”

“Okay,” Derek says, glancing at Stiles. He knows for a fact that Peter and Stiles had a long discussion about that the previous day. Stiles had wanted to know what had happened to Deucalion’s body. He doesn’t blame Stiles for that. They’ve both had several nightmares about what the alpha put them through. Closure was something they both needed. It had turned into a long discussion about different methods of disposing of bodies. Stiles had taken notes. Derek knows about this because he was the one that Stiles told about it afterwards, about how he still has doubts about what he can and can’t do, but he wants to know everything he can, so at least all the decisions he makes will be informed ones. He won’t – he can’t – keep everything to himself, though. So Derek is the one that will listen to the secrets that Stiles has to keep.

“What about Marin?” Stiles asks, fiddling with the tea bag. “And the people who were backing Deucalion financially?”

“Marin has gone back to her coven,” Talia says. “As for the backers, I’ve thoughtfully let them know that I know who they all are, and thanks to Deucalion’s financial information, their ties to various terrorist organizations, and Peter’s general skullduggery, I’ve got enough blackmail material on them to keep them from doing so much as looking at any werewolf sideways for the next fifty years.”
“Awesome,” Derek says.

“By the way,” Talia says, “Stiles, I’ve got fifteen interview requests for you sitting on my desk. What would you like me to do with them?”

“Ewwww,” Stiles says, pushing a hand through his hair. “I guess I can do a couple of them. Who did I – who was it that wasn’t an asshole last time? That blonde lesbian, what’s her name . . .?”

“Ellen DeGeneres,” Talia says. “An actual news interview might not be a terrible idea, but we could do that one written. Aaron can help us put it together and then put it up on the web. But is there a reason you don’t want to do interviews?”

Stiles looks away. “I just . . . everyone’s going to be all over me, calling me a hero again,” he says. “And this time it’s even less accurate than last time, at least about the babies in Chicago. I didn’t solve anything. Leo Stewart did. He put the whole thing together. All I did was find his notes.”

“You found his notes because you looked for them,” Tom points out. “And you looked for them because you found out he was missing and realized there might be a connection, and you did that because you worked on the case in every spare moment until you found a new lead. Are you trying to say that if I had done all that, you would think I didn’t deserve any of the credit?”

“Well, no,” Stiles says, flushing pink. “I just . . . sometimes I feel like people give me too much credit.”

“Look, I’m pretty sure there are self-help books written about not being able to take a compliment,” Tom says. “It’s not an uncommon problem. Hey, you know who should get final say on this? How about Leo’s wife, Felicia? Because she called earlier today. She wanted to know if we could fly out this summer because she wants to meet you. And she wants her kids to meet you. Because they all think you’re amazing.”

“Da-ad,” Stiles groans.

“No, think about this,” Tom says. “Think about what this means to her. Her husband sacrificed his life trying to solve the murder of their child. And if you hadn’t come along, his sacrifice would be meaningless. It would be a stack of papers in a storage unit under a fake name, waiting for the lease to run out and be auctioned off and thrown into the trash. Instead, you found the trail he left, we put it together, and both their baby’s murderer and Leo’s are going to face justice. Imagine what that means to that woman.”

Stiles is flushed bright pink. “I guess I can see how it’s a little important,” he mumbles.

Talia clears her throat and says quietly, “They’re putting together a memorial for the babies,” she says, “and they – all the parents, not just Felicia Stewart – would like you to be there when it’s unveiled. I think they’d like it if you were willing to go.”

“Well, shit, I can’t say no to that,” Stiles mumbles, and he’s saved by the whistling of the kettle. He busies himself making the tea while the adults at the table share fond but exasperated glances. “As long as nobody fawns over me too much.”

“How about me?” Derek asks, pulling Stiles into his lap when he brings over the tea. “Can I fawn over you?”

“Only in the bedroom,” Stiles tells him.

“Actually, speaking of people who are grateful to you,” Talia says, “I had a visitor of that nature at
the office today which surprised me.” She picks up another cookie and says, “Chris Argent stopped by. He wanted to apologize for how he treated us while Peter was a suspect, and thank you, Stiles, for making sure his father’s murder was solved.”

“I didn’t do it for him,” Stiles mutters.

“I know,” Talia says, “and he knows, too. Don’t forget, he wasn’t on good terms with his father. But, well. He was still his father. I think he was just grateful that it didn’t go unsolved, and he didn’t have to worry about anyone possibly targeting other members of his family, like his daughter.”

“Fair enough,” Stiles says, reaching for the plate of cookies. He takes two and feeds one to Derek. “I guess I can probably go back to studying for my lifelong dream of becoming a kickass detective like my old man now.”

“Damn straight,” Derek says, pressing a kiss into the skin behind his ear. “C’mon, you. A good night’s sleep is part of that recipe.” He stands up, scooping Stiles up and depositing him on his feet. He can’t wait until the sling is off his arm. “G’night, Mom, Tom.”

“Good night, you two,” Talia says, her shoulders huffing with the effort not to laugh. Tom just shakes his head, tousles his son’s hair, and goes for another cookie.

“So did what your dad said actually sink in at all?” Derek asks once they’re in the bedroom, as Stiles strips his shirt off.

“I guess so,” Stiles says. “And I mean . . . to a certain extent, I could keep trying to duck people’s praise if it only happened once. But like my dad says, once is chance, twice is coincidence, and three times is a pattern.”

“Don’t forget all those cold cases you solved for Duke,” Derek says.

“Ugh. I’ve been trying to.” Stiles shakes his head. “I know that . . . it’s not my fault, what he did. And to be fair, most of those people probably deserved the death penalty. But I’m still kind of sore over the whole thing.”

Derek nuzzles his hair a little. “I can understand that. But . . . try to let it go, if you can.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says, with a sigh. He helps Derek take the sling off and slides his shirt over his head. “Anyway, all modesty aside, I guess I am pretty good at this. Aphasia or no. Which reminds me that I have a history test on Tuesday, yuck.” He shoves his pants down and chucks them towards the hamper, missing by several inches. Then he crawls into bed. Derek joins him there a minute later. “You know what I just realized?” Stiles asks, and Derek shakes his head, turning out the bedside lamp. “It’s been far too long since I’ve told you how incredibly amazing you are, how devastatingly hot, and how completely, unreservedly, and desperately I’m in love with you.”

Derek turns pink up to the tips of his ears. “Shut up,” he mumbles, burying his face in Stiles’ neck.

“You tell me sappy stuff like that every day,” Stiles says, laughing and combing his fingers through Derek’s hair. “It’s my turn.” He’s quiet for a minute. “I was afraid you’d be angry at me. For . . . the choices I made. When Duke . . .”

“No,” Derek says. “I know that you don’t want any of us to die. That . . . it was just words, Stiles. Don’t worry about it. And you were right, you know. I’d rather die than live without you.”

Stiles sighs, somewhat melodramatically, but Derek can feel the tension easing out of his body.
“We’re pretty fucking hopeless, aren’t we.”

“I’m okay with that,” Derek says.

“Good,” Stiles says. “Me too.”

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