The Fixer's Glass Houses

by ebjameston

Summary

“I’m building something better,” Peter continues. “B6-13 had become sloppy, unwieldy, subjective. I’m remodeling it into something superior. You could be part of that.”

“Yeah?” Stiles says, slamming the dishwasher closed so forcefully that he hears it reverb through the pipes. Starbuck barks sharply. “What are you going to call it? B-six-fourteen?”

The line of Peter’s jaw hardens. “I find it hard to believe that your mother tolerated such insolence when you were growing up.”

“You don’t know anything about how I grew up,” Stiles snaps.

Peter just smiles, predatory. “Don’t I?”

Notes

PSA: This is the third part in a series, and you’re going to be seriously confused if you don’t read The Fixer and the First Son and The Fixer in Wonderland first.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Derek is supposed to love being in New Orleans.

He grew up here. He grew up running down the streets of the French Quarter to make fun of tourists, spending lazy summer days at the Jazz & Heritage Festival, picking up the off-kilter mix of French and Cajun spoken only by those who can trace their roots back to the bayou the way the Hales can. September through June of every year may have been spent at the most prestigious private schools up and down the east coast, and Derek might appreciate St. Louis, Boston, and DC on their own merits, but New Orleans? Derek has a lifetime love affair with New Orleans. Culture and music and food and people, sites and history and legends and the unbelievably tight-knit community of those who call it home. Derek can feel in his bones – New Orleans.

He’s supposed to love it here. He only makes it down a few times a year anymore, but he usually spends the whole first day just walking the city, getting it sunk into his skin again.

This time, he spends the weekend sitting in his loft, watching ESPN Classic and a documentary on prairie dogs. He works out aggressively in the little gym in his building and tries to get Luke to spar with him, but the Secret Service agent refuses. He answers his phone when his sisters text or call because after the two weeks they’ve had, they’re all a little quick to worry and need to be in contact more than usual. But he shuts down any conversation that turns even vaguely in Stiles’ direction, because thinking about him – it – her – he can’t. He just can’t.

Then it’s Monday. Derek isn’t sure how he’s supposed to function when three days ago he found out that his – what is Stiles to him, anyway? His friend? His ex-boyfriend? His I-hoped-you’d-be-my-boyfriend-someday-person? His person-I-wanted-to-be-different-stronger-better-for? – when three days ago, he found out that Stiles’ mother was not only alive, but had tried to kill Derek’s mother twice and Stiles had known about it for months and hadn’t done a damn thing to stop her.

It's too complicated put into phrasing, even when Derek is just thinking about it.

So, he doesn’t try. He just…goes to work.

It’s shockingly simple, actually. He’s been a bang-up compartmentalizer from day one, so he brushes off those skills and puts them into use. It’s a busy week at Hale Enterprises NOLA, too, which helps: the London branch opens the following Monday, so everything is conference calls at odd hours with the London and Amsterdam folks and long, detailed lists of everything that needs to go off without a hitch. All the domestic branch directors are around, as are most of the VPs, and the board of directors is making it a point to be available by phone. Something that Derek loves about HaleEnt is that they’ve never really grown out of that roll-up-your-sleeves, everyone’s-a-team-player attitude that his grandfather, Arthur Hale, had instilled when Hale Enterprises was just twenty people working out of someone’s basement – and that spirit is probably the reason that 10PM on Wednesday finds Derek in a conference room with two other directors, a VP, a handful of guys from Legal, and ten interns, assembly line-ing the disassembly, re-ordering, and re-assembly of several hundred info packets they need for Friday’s launch party.

“I’d just like to point out once again that we are a tech company,” says Evelyn Lacroix, the director of the Seattle branch, “and that it’s ridiculous that we can’t figure out a better way to do
“This packet must’ve gone through at least two dozen hands before it got to the printer,” Ryan groans, dumping herself into the chair next to the takeout. “How did no one check to make sure the pages were in order?”

“It’s a simple mistake,” Derek shrugs, emerging from the bag with a beignet and powdered sugar-covered hand. “At least we caught it when we did.”

Ryan snorts. “Can you imagine if it’d gotten to Friday and your dad was in the middle of his big speech, talking everyone through the packet, and then the pages aren’t in the right order?”

“He’d have made a clever joke and no one would have remembered in five minutes,” says Evelyn, taking a seat on her wife’s lap. “David’s got charisma coming out of his ears.”

“That he does,” Derek agrees, sitting next to them. They’re at the far end of the table – Derek can see his reflection in the wall-mounted monitor they used for a video meeting with the London office earlier today.

“So, how’s the president doing?” Evelyn asks quietly, after a furtive look around the room. “And your dad?”

Derek picks his beignet into pieces, considering what to say. Ev and Ryan are old friends of the family – they’ve both got ten years on Derek and started working at the Seattle branch when he was still in high school, quickly ascending up the ranks to branch director and overall Manufacturing VP. They attended Cora’s wedding because Cora actually wanted them there, not just because they’re big names at HaleEnt. “They’re both doing well. My mom’s irritated that she has to have a check-up twice a day, and my dad probably won’t stop worrying every time she sneezes for at least the next decade, but they’re good. Thanks for asking.”

“It’s good that he’s staying in DC until Monday,” Ryan muses. She rubs at a spot behind Evelyn’s ear that makes her sigh. “If anything happened to this one, I wouldn’t let her out of my sight anytime soon.”

“Plus, we’ve got a Hale here to take over if anything goes wrong,” Evelyn adds, leaning in to Ryan’s touch. “Not that anything –.”

The phone on the table rings, cutting her off, and Ryan smacks her lightly upside the head. “Why, babe? Why?”

“Answer it,” Derek says, ignoring them and nodding to the intern sitting closest to the phone. The college kid pokes the requisite buttons and the voice of one of the overnight receptionists – Marjorie, maybe, or Margaret – fills the room.
“I’ve got the London office on the other line looking for David Hale,” she says. “They say it’s an emergency.”

Derek gestures at the intern, who just looks back at him blankly, so Derek stands up and paces over to the phone. “Put them through.”

Three hours later, Derek boards a red-eye to Heathrow.

“Appendicitis,” says Jeremy Milton, director of HaleEnt London, when he wakes up to find Derek at his hospital bedside. “Acute appendicitis complicated by a preexisting blood condition five days before my branch opens. I’d have ripped the bloody thing out with my own hands a year ago if I’d have known this was going to happen.”

“Everything went smoothly,” Derek assures him, rubbing a hand across his chin and trying to remember the last time he’d shaved. It’s Monday, around 7PM according to the clock on the wall, and things like shaving and changing his shirt approximately every twenty-four hours have gone out the window in favor of getting the London branch up and running while their director was out of commission. He didn’t sleep on the flight over, hasn’t made an effort to adjust to the local time zone, and worked about 65 hours between touching down at noon on Thursday and right now, so the fact that he’s coherent at all is probably a miracle. “The server crashed when R&D’s backup systems kicked in, but I.T. got it back up in twenty minutes. Congratulations.”

Jeremy waves a weak hand. “I should be congratulating you. You saved my ass with this one, Hale. All of our asses. My team’s been sending me ‘Don’t come back, we want to keep Derek forever’ emails since Saturday.”

“You put in six months of prep work,” Derek yawns. “I showed up for the last four days and helped get you across the finish line, but that’s it.”

“Don’t be a prick when I’m thanking you, Hale. It can’t have been easy for you to leave your family to come over for this, and I appreciate the sacrifice.”

Derek replays Laura’s screeched reaction when he called her to say that he was heading to another continent for a few days. “It’s been nice to get away, actually. To be somewhere where the cover of every magazine isn’t my mother’s face. Or that woman’s.”

“Stilinski?” Jeremy shifts in his bed. “Seems like a properly crazy bitch. Can’t believe they still haven’t found her. And related to that other bloke, the press secretary? Right madhouse you’ve got going on in the states. Did you know him? The son?”

Derek realizes he’s picking at his cuticles. “No,” he says, wiping away a tiny spot of blood. “No, not really.”

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It’s another two weeks before Jeremy is back on his feet and up to speed, and Derek sticks around for two weeks after that just to make sure everything’s transitioned properly. Or because London,
It is not because he’s a chickenshit little manchild running away from his problems, as Laura so indelicately puts it during their Skype call on the night that marks a full month in London.

“You were there, Laura,” Derek protests, rubbing at his eyes and regretting accepting this call at 11PM his time. “You didn’t hear him – he knew that his mother was alive. And that she was the one trying to kill Mom. He could have told anyone, but he didn’t, and she almost died as a result.”

“But she didn’t,” Laura says succinctly. “Mom didn’t die, Dad’s running a half-marathon next month to prove that his leg healed up just fine, and if you remember, Stiles got shot, too.”

“Stiles and Cora were the only two targets left when he got hit.” Laura shakes her head. “And Cora probably would have died if Stiles hadn’t been there.”

“Which would be a really good way to make us all think that he’s on our side,” Derek says, but the words sound hollow even to him.

Laura, for her part, is starting to get legitimately pissed. “Do you honestly think that Stiles had anything to do with the shooting? Or the poisoning? Because the Stiles I know would die before letting anything happen to our family. Literally.”

Derek drags a hand across his chin. He’s working some serious scruff these days. “No. At least, I don’t think so. But he should have told someone, Laura. Me, or you, or Deaton – hell, he knows Erica and Boyd well enough. He could have told them.”

Laura peels a strip of paper off the label of her bottle and rolls it up between her fingers. “I think there’s a reason he didn’t.”

“Laura,” Derek says cautiously, suddenly wide awake. “What do you know?”

“Nothing!” She says, flicking the ball of paper at the screen. “Nothing. But the US Attorney for DC cleared him, Derek. And Mom and Peter both still want him around. Don’t you think there’s got to be a reason for that?”

“A reason no one will tell us doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence,” Derek says darkly. He misses Stiles, sure – misses him sharply every time he sees something he wants to tell Stiles about, misses him like a phantom limb every other waking moment – but that doesn’t change the fact that Stiles lied to him. About serious things. Repeatedly. For months.

It also doesn’t change the fact that Derek hasn’t received a single call, text, or email from Stiles since leaving for London.

Not that Derek checks.

“Derek,” Laura says sharply, then sighs and softens her tone. “I get that you’re hurt. You’ve got trust issues a mile wide and two miles deep, and you and Stiles were finally friends before all of
this happened. But you’re thirty-two, Grumble Bear. You want to hide from your problems, that’s fine, but you have to do it domestically – no more of this fleeing-to-a-foreign-country shit. I had Louise book you a ticket home for Saturday. Luke and Chen are under orders to put you on that plane, even if it’s against your will.”

“Laura,” Derek begins, the ire that’s always just an inch too close to the surface these days bubbling uncomfortably, but Laura cuts him off.

“I don’t want to hear it,” she says. “Your job is here. Your family is here. Grow up. Come home.”

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September, Year One of Talia Hale’s First Term (3.58 years ago)

“Keep your hands up, dude,” Scott says again, swiping at Stiles’ jaw. “It’s the number one rule in boxing, you have to—.”

“Keep your hands up, I got it,” Stiles says, ducking under Scott’s arm and then collapsing to the floor. “Can’t. No more. I surrender. All my base are belong to you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Scott says cheerfully, plopping down onto the floor next to him in the middle of their Fox & Hole ring. “And we probably shouldn’t sit down here. We’re going to catch a fungus or something.”

“Don’t care,” Stiles pants. He strips off his mitts and chucks them away.

“I can’t believe you’ve had an open invitation to a secret boxing club that is literally underground and you only told me about it today,” Scott says, wiggling over to the corner on his stomach and coming back with a water bottle. “This is easily the coolest thing about you. I think I saw a senator’s dick in the locker room.”

“You are the only person I know who’d be excited about that.” Stiles squirts some of the water onto his forehead and lets it dribble into his hair. “I run twenty-five miles a week, minimum. How am I this exhausted after half an hour of boxing?”

“We weren’t even really boxing,” Scott contributes. “I’m just teaching you the basics.”

“Helpful. Supportive.”

Scott snorts and lies down next to him. “Are you actually going to tell me what brought on the sudden need to learn to fight now?”

Stiles shakes out his right hand, his still slightly fissured second knuckle sending phantom pains up his arm from the connection with Derek’s jaw five weeks ago. “I can’t throw a decent punch to save my life. It’s embarrassing. I’m a grown man.”

“Nice try,” Scott says drily. “You’ve never been a fighter. Not a with-your-fists fighter, and never off the lacrosse field, anyway. Tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s nothing.”
“I’ll call Lydia.”

Stiles scowls at the ceiling. “Low blow.”

Scott shrugs, the movement horizontal and jerky against the slightly padded floor. “You gave me a five-minute speech about using every weapon in my arsenal before I walked into my last oral exam of law school.”

“I meant your puppy-dog eyes, Scott, not Lydia. She’s the nuclear option.”

“The shortest path between two points is –.”

“Oh my God, you’re a terrible human being,” Stiles groans, flopping an arm at Scott’s chest in disgust. He shuts his eyes and lets the sounds of the gym (little shouts, the rhythmic impact of body parts against mats and mitts, occasional outburst of laughter) lull him into something resembling a Zen state. It’s easy, then, to replay the last month – the month since his dad died – in his head as an impartial observer.

“Two main reasons,” he says. “You remember I told you about, uh, Terrance? From the Hale Communications team?”

He can feel Scott nodding, tiny vibrations traveling across the pad. “The guy you were hooking up with, right? Who had the wife, but you didn’t know about her until Election Day?”

Stiles bites back a laugh. He’d almost forgotten some of the details of his own cover story. “Yeah. He came to my dad’s funeral.”

“What?” Scott rockets upright and drags Stiles with him, forcing him to open his eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Stiles waves him off, aiming for nonchalance while swallowing down the bile that still rises at the back of his throat whenever he thinks about his dad, the funeral, or anything else even remotely related to Beacon Hills these days. “I knew you’d go all Rambo on his ass, and it wasn’t really the time or place for that. Anyway, he showed up, and I got pissed, and I tried to hit him.”

“Stiles,” Scott says, his voice soft, and Stiles consciously avoids making eye contact so he doesn’t have to see the concern or sympathy. “That’s why you were wearing the splint? You told me you punched a tree.”

“I was embarrassed,” Stiles says. “And a little drunk, at the time. But mostly embarrassed.”

Scott settles his feet under his knees. “I thought we got past being embarrassed with each other a long time ago.”

Stiles steeps his fingers and rests his chin on them. “We did. We are. I’m sorry.” He hates himself for this, for not being able to tell Scott the truth about Derek and everything that happened between them. It’s been almost a full year since the election, Talia’s securely stationed at the White House – he could tell Scott. Scott can secret-keep with the best of them, proven by the fact that no one outside the five people who were directly involved know anything about what happened with the McCall ranch. But telling Scott means reliving all of it, sorting back through every memory of him and Derek that he now looks back on and thinks, That was a red flag, there’s another warning sign, stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Don’t be sorry, dude, just talk to me,” Scott says, frustration clear in his voice. “I’m your best friend. You’re supposed to tell me shit like this.”
“It’s not exactly easy to talk about,” Stiles sighs, running his fingers through water- and sweat-drenched hair. “Anyway, it’s not like I’m planning on starting a bar fight anytime soon. But I should be able to hold my own. If I want to hit someone, I want to be able to hit them, you know?”

He finally flicks his eyes up to Scott’s face, and Scott’s watching him carefully, but without a trace of pity. “I get it. You know I get that. You know what my dad – I get it. What’s the other reason?”

Stiles thinks back to the second part of the night of his dad’s funeral, the paralyzing panic attack in front of Derek and Scott, the worst one he’d had since freshman year of college, the feeling of his respiratory system declaring civil war against the rest of his body. “You know how I started running because I read that article about using regular, controlled physical exertion to mitigate anxiety?”

Scott nods. “Sophomore year.”

“Yeah, well, running’s clearly not doing it for me anymore,” Stiles says drily. “Apparently, I need another outlet.”

“What you need is to talk to a therapist.”

A voice from above interrupts them. “If you don’t mind, gentlemen, I’ve got this ring next and you don’t seem to be using it anymore.”

“Senator Argent,” Stiles says, squinting to make out Chris Argent’s shape against the fluorescent lights. “I didn’t know you were a member here.”

“Please, Stiles, call me Chris,” the senator says, offering a hand. “I joined up when I got elected six years ago. My father’s idea.”

Stiles lets Chris tow him to his feet, then does the same for Scott. “Beneficial to have one of the Argents of Argent Arms in a room with the high-profile ex-military sect, I’d imagine.”

Chris looks at him appraisingly. “Something like that, yes. Who’s your friend?”

“Scott McCall,” Scott says, shaking Chris’ hand heartily. “Friend of Stiles’ from Stanford. It’s an honor to meet you, sir – your work on the Subcommittee for International Operations and Organizations is incredible.”

Chris’ eyes widen, and he shakes Scott’s hand with a little more oomph. “I’m impressed. Are you in the business?”

“Dad, no work talk in the ring,” a voice behind them chides, and all three men turn to see a young woman with dark brown hair braided back out of her face ducking between the ropes. She finishes tucking a piece of tape into her wrist wrap and bounds lightly to her father’s side, grinning at all of them. “There are rules about that. Hi, I’m Allison.”

"Sorry, honey,” Chris says, rolling his eyes in a manner completely unbefitting a United States Senator “This is Stiles Stilinski, White House Press Secretary, and his friend Scott. Stiles, Scott, this is my daughter Allison, who is learning to box."

"If ‘learning’ means ‘kicking your butt six ways to Sunday,’ then sure, learning,” Allison says with a sweet smile. “C’mon, old man, I’ve got to get back to the restaurant by 1:30 or my sous chef will have a meltdown. Scott, Stiles, nice to meet you!”

“I think I’m in love,” Scott whispers as Stiles bodily shoves him towards the locker room.
Scott’s long been asleep on the couch when Stiles, finally succumbing in the battle with his own curiosity, tiptoes across his dinky living room to the bookshelf. He doesn’t even need the light from his phone to find the book he’s looking for – *The Count of Monte Cristo* has been in the same place ever since he moved in.

He tugs it carefully out from between his battered copy of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* and *Anna Karenina*, hissing at every noise he makes while he pads over the kitchen. When he sets the book down, it falls open to the bright blue envelope that’s been serving as a pseudo-bookmark for months. He stares at the familiar, sharply-angled handwriting, warring with himself again. This is a stupid thing to do. Whatever Derek had to say to him at graduation, it doesn’t matter. He’s put all of the Derek shit behind him. He’s had to, otherwise he’d still flinch whenever Laura mentions her brother’s name and he’d probably lock himself in his apartment whenever there’s a state function.

Okay, not really. It’s not that bad. Yes, it had been fucking terrible right at the beginning, but he’s…getting there. It’s taken a lot of time in his own head, a lot of listening to Marvin Gaye albums on repeat and staring into space, a lot of trying to imagine what his mom would say. But it’s getting better.

Fuck it.

Stiles, as carefully as he can, sets a pot of water on the stove and sits on the counter, running his fingers along the edges of the envelope and waiting for the water to boil. He hasn’t done this in a few years – not since he last steamed open a couple of his dad’s documents regarding the more interesting cases coming across the sheriff’s desk – but the principle remains the same. Rolling boil, hold the envelope in the steam, gently work your thumb into the seam, and – there.

It’s a generic card, one of those *ConGRADulations* ones with balloons on the front, and Stiles is almost pissed. Seriously? This is what Derek sent? Three months of Stiles wondering what grand words Derek might have painstakingly selected, and he gets this –

He opens the card, and his fingers start shaking. Derek’s cramped, untidy writing takes up every inch.

*Stiles,*

*Congratulations on graduating. First in your class at Stanford, that’s pretty amazing.*

*Everything I write sounds so idiotic. Like we don’t even know each other, like we didn’t spend five months working side-by-side and eating every meal together and waking up to each other’s horrible morning breath. I still look for you when someone makes a joke to see if you got it – how pathetic is that?*

*I guess I miss you, if this is what missing a person is. Laura talks about you all the time and I want to kill her for having stories with you that I’m not a part of.*

*I’m not a good guy, but I think you know that. I shouldn’t have started anything with you at all. I*
knew you’d get hurt, I knew I wasn’t…I knew it was a bad idea. The first night we met, you were brilliant and just talked at me for a minute straight without breathing and smiled like

I don’t know how to make things better between us. I feel like I’ve apologized a hundred times, but my words it doesn’t mean anything until you forgive me. Or yell at me. Or

You told me once, quoting Dumas, that what makes you a man is what you do when the storm comes. The storm came, and I ran away, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to make that up to you. I don’t know if you’ll ever let me try. I wouldn’t know where to start.

…because you were right. We were in a relationship, or at least at the very beginning of one, and I wanted more – God, I wanted to be the good guy – but I was scared. And I knew it would hurt you more if I tried, because it always hurts more in the long run, and I didn’t want that for you. You deserved better than me. You still do.

So…congratulations on graduating. I'm sorry for everything.

Derek

P.S. This is the seventh card I bought because I kept writing stupid things and having to throw them out. I know this one is unfinished and choppy and awful, and it’s nowhere near everything I need to say, but Luke’s looking at me like he’s going to have me committed if I go back to Hallmark again. So try not to hate me too much for the balloons. Hate me for other things, but the balloons are innocent in all of this.
but in the end, in wonderland, we both went mad

Chapter Summary

“I’m building something better,” Peter continues when Stiles doesn’t respond. “B6-13 had become sloppy, unwieldy, subjective. I’m remodeling it into something superior. You could be part of that.”

“Yeah?” Stiles says, slamming the dishwasher closed so forcefully that he hears it reverb through the pipes. Starbuck barks sharply. “What are you going to call it? B-six-fourteen?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“Lydia says you’re not allowed to get anything princess-cut because Allison thinks that’s a cliché,” Stiles says, reading the text aloud.

Scott straightens up from his hunch over the ring case, dismay written all over his face. “How am I supposed to know which ones are princess ones?”

“You could probably ask someone who works here,” Stiles deadpans, pocketing his phone and looking around the jewelry store for an employee. “But you really shouldn’t worry too much. Allison will love anything you get her because she’s her and you’re you and baby birds help you both get dressed in the morning. Plus, you can still play the ‘I got mugged and shot’ sympathy card.”

Scott trails the fingers of one hand along the display’s glass, eliciting an obnoxious squeak. His other hand rests just below his left ribs, index finger rubbing back and forth over the still-healing scar beneath. “I feel awful about lying to her about all of this. How can I ask her to marry me when I can’t tell her the truth?”

“You’re keeping her safe,” Stiles says automatically. This conversation is reflexive for them by now – when Stiles gets worked up about lying to Derek, Scott calms him down. When Scott drowns in guilt over lying to Allison, Stiles steps in.

Allison, however, didn’t travel three and a half thousand miles to get away from Scott.

“I know, I know,” Scott fake-grumbles. “Tell me it’ll be over soon?”

The prompt makes Stiles pause. It would be easy to say yes, sure, it’ll be over soon, we’ll all get our lives back and put this behind us and go back to business as usual. Scott’s not looking for brutal honesty right now, he just wants reassurance that somehow, they’ll make it out of this.

But the words stick in Stiles’ throat. It’s been nearly six weeks since President Hale resumed office, and for the most part, life goes on much the way it did before. Now, though, Peter or Malia show
up in the Stilinski & Associates office once a week or so with a new client and completely unveiled threats about what will happen if they don’t perform as instructed. No one has seen Claudia Stilinski (Stiles’ mother, former Command of B6-13, and alleged attempted presidential assassin), although baked goods bearing pointless but I’m-watching-you messages still pop up in his office or apartment on a regular basis. Stiles and Kate, whom they’ve finally coaxed out of hiding and should be back in DC any day now, were both cleared of any involvement with the assassination attempts by US Attorney Poitier – which didn’t come as a surprise, since Stiles and Lydia personally concocted the entire “Claire Collins/Claudia Stilinski is the Big Bad” scheme and put all the evidence in place.

The S&A team is rebuilding their Post-it matrix on a wall of Lydia’s apartment, but Stiles doesn’t even know what they’re looking for anymore. They’ve had to retract anything Malia told them because they can’t be certain if it’s true, and without direct input from an active B6-13 agent, it’s impossible to make progress. He needs something concrete, something real, something inarguable he can take to the president and say, “Look, this is happening. We need to move on it immediately and get everyone Peter is threatening to safety.”

But instead, Stiles’ Adderall habit is reaching concerning levels, Lydia and Jackson are stuck in off-again mode, Isaac is still barely talking, Kira spends more hours coding than she does sleeping, and Scott can’t walk for more than 15 minutes without getting winded.

Stiles is starting to feel like they’re losing. And he really, really doesn’t like that.

“Hey,” Scott says, snapping his fingers in front of Stiles’ face. “Where’d you go?”

“Sorry, buddy,” Stiles says, smiling ruefully. “Just got distracted for a second. Did something tickle your fancy?”

“I like that one,” Scott says, leaving a smudged fingerprint against the glass that has an attendant glaring in their direction. “But you don’t think it’s too…” Scott trails off, making an expansive gesture with his hands.

“I have no idea what that means,” Stiles says bluntly, digging his phone back out to take a picture of the ring and send it to Lydia for proxy approval. “You’re terrible at this.”

Scott scoffs and wanders a few feet away, looking at a row of sapphire-encrusted necklaces. Stiles taps his phone repeatedly, trying to get the camera to ignore the glare off the glass.

“Dylan. Dylan.”

Scott nudges him in side, blurring the photo. Stiles scowls up at him. “What?”

Scott makes expressive eyebrows toward the door, and Stiles turns to see – oh.

“Danny, hey,” Stiles says, awkwardly holding out his hand. “Haven’t heard from you in awhile.”

“Since our one pseudo-date a month and a half ago, when you kissed me and then disappeared.”

“I’m really sorry about that,” Danny says, shaking Stiles’ hand and looking sincere. “Work stuff got a little crazy – I had a bunch of traveling to do.”

“No, it’s cool,” Stiles says, surprised to find that it actually is. He’s barely had time to breathe recently, let alone foster a new friendship with a guy who still doesn’t know his real name.

“What’re you doing here?”

“I was just walking past, and I saw Starbuck outside,” Danny explains, pointing through the
window to where Stiles’ dog, looped to a tree, is happily enjoying attention from passers-by. “Are you, uh, looking to settle down?”

“What – no, God no,” Stiles says, reaching blindly back for Scott’s arm and pulling him forward. “This is my best friend, uh, Tyler. He’s going to be proposing to his girlfriend any day now.”

“Congratulations!” Danny says, shaking Scott’s hand enthusiastically. “That’s awesome. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Scott says, giving Stiles a what-the-hell-is-wrong-with-you look.

“Well, anyway, I’ve got to get going,” Danny says. “Just wanted to stop in and say hi and sorry for going MIA. I’m around for the next couple weeks, Dylan, so…let me know?”

“Will do,” Stiles says, the bell on the door already tinkling. He watches Danny give Starbuck a quick head-pat before he clears out of the store’s line of vision, then turns to see Scott barely containing laughter. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Scott defends, holding up his hands in a show of innocence that does nothing to detract from his smile and mischievously sparkling eyes. “Should I even ask for an explanation, Dylan?”

“Shut up,” Stiles says again, trying to glare. It probably shouldn’t be funny. God knows they have a lot of seriously serious shit in their lives. Lydia’s due in court for the McGregor case in a few hours, Stiles has backlogged completion reports to work through, Kira’s been trying to track down a lead on Claudia in Hong Kong. They shouldn’t be laughing in a jewelry store on a Thursday afternoon.

But, hell, maybe this is exactly what they should be doing. Lydia’s always telling him to take a break from the crazy every now and then.

“I’m just saying, I didn’t realize that you’d taken your disguises up a notch to actually include fake names,” Scott says, flicking the brim of the old Mets cap Stiles has taken to wearing whenever he’s out in public.

Stiles readjusts his cap, scowling again. “It’s easier than people stopping me on the street to accuse me of domestic terrorism. And anything is easier than stopping Isaac from assaulting those people who do.”

Scott frowns, all concern and loyalty. “I thought you said it was getting better?”

Stiles shrugs and goes back to snapping a picture of the ring. “It will. A story this size takes a long time to die in a city like this, though. ‘The president’s press secretary is the son of the president’s would-be assassin!’ It has a nice ring to it. Get it? A ring?”

Scott’s frown deepens, not in the least amused by Stiles’ lame attempt at a pun. “It’s not funny, Stiles. What if you get seriously hurt?”

“What, like getting shot?” Stiles says, looking pointedly at Scott’s stomach and resisting the urge to run his fingers over the dime-sized scar on his own ribs.

***
Peter is sitting on Stiles’ couch when he gets home, and it’s not even the first time this has happened this week.

“What do you want, Peter?” Stiles asks tiredly. He leaves his work bag on the table by the door and goes to the kitchen, appreciating the way Starbuck circles protectively around his legs whenever Peter’s nearby.

“I just thought I’d drop by to check on your progress with the Dalton situation,” Peter says, following him into the kitchen but maintaining a decent distance when Starbuck takes up a low-level growl. “You weren’t at your desk this afternoon.”

“I had an errand to run,” Stiles says, rummaging aimlessly through the fridge. He’s not really hungry – Peter comes with the unexpected side effect of diminished appetite.

“Mr. McCall’s engagement ring.”

Stiles’ stomach clenches involuntarily, and he tries to disguise the shudder by opening the dishwasher and putting things away. “The Dalton case is handled. Should have the paperwork done by Monday.”

Peter makes an appreciative noise, and chuckles when Starbuck’s growl ratchets up a few degrees in response. “I must say, Stiles, you and your team are quite impressive. I wonder what it would take for you to consider full-time employment with Wonderland?”

Stiles white-knuckles the handle of a knife, wondering if he’s capable of throwing it across the room to lodge in Peter’s chest. Physically, he knows he’s able – Isaac taught them all to throw knives as a truly unsettling Christmas present one year. But he’s still not sure if it’s strength or weakness to kill someone, figures it’s all mostly situational, and doesn’t know where this falls on the spectrum.

Plus, this isn’t a throwing knife. It’s just a kitchen knife and the balance is all wrong, so he tucks it into the utensil rack of the dishwasher and ignores the voice in his head that sounds like a mix of his mother and Allison saying *Always wash your knives by hand.*

“I’m building something better,” Peter continues when Stiles doesn’t respond. “B6-13 had become sloppy, unwieldy, subjective. I’m remodeling it into something superior. You could be part of that.”

“Yeah?” Stiles says, slamming the dishwasher closed so forcefully that he hears it reverb through the pipes. Starbuck barks sharply. “What are you going to call it? B-six-fourteen?”

The line of Peter’s jaw hardens. “I find it hard to believe that your mother tolerated such insolence when you were growing up.”

“You don’t know anything about how I grew up,” Stiles snaps.

Peter just smiles, predatory and dangerous. “Don’t I?”

Stiles stares back and imagines shooting Peter in the kneecap. *That* he wouldn’t have a problem with. “If there’s nothing else, Peter, I’d appreciate you getting the hell out of my apartment.”

Peter smirks and glides toward the door, pausing to skim his hand over the strap of Stiles’ bag. “Actually, there is one other thing: I want to make sure the terms of our arrangement are clear. If
Talia, David, or any of their children learn about B6-13 or my involvement in it, the protection I am currently offering them and your team will cease and I will be forced to clean house.”

Stiles hides his shaking hands – anger? fear? frustration? – by aggressively scrubbing at the cheese caked on to the side of a casserole tin. “I know the rules, Peter. Why are you telling me this again?”

Peter twists the strap of Stiles’ bag through his fingers. “Now that my nephew is back in town, I wouldn’t want your tongue to waggle inappropriately during pillow talk.”

Stiles drops the casserole tin, and sudsy water splashes up onto his shirt. “Derek’s back?” He hadn’t known that. Why hadn’t he known that?

Peter raises an eyebrow – possibly the most emotion Stiles has ever seen from him. “I would have expected you to be the first on his call list upon returning stateside. Interesting. At any rate, the conditions stand. You’re expecting Katherine Argent on Thursday, correct?”

Stiles nods, unable to conjure up words. How long has Derek been back? Was he in London all this time?

“Very well. My understanding is that she still believes she fled the country to give the American people peace of mind while you searched for the true culprit, that being your mother, and she returns now as a free woman. I’ll trust your team to perpetuate that belief and keep her from asking any…sensitive questions. You’ll decline all interview requests for her with the exception of one with Ms. Maddie Duggan, which you will facilitate. It will be best, of course, if she returns to California and resumes a life out of the public eye as soon as is acceptable.”

Stiles nods again, head still spinning. They’ve been over all of this countless times, Stiles and Lydia and Peter and Malia in high-tension, high-stakes strategy discussions in back corners of coffee shops, on park benches, in Stiles’ office. That’s fine, he can handle all of it, the plans are already in motion – but Derek’s back?

Starbuck whines and presses her head into the side of his knee. When he looks up, the door is swinging closed.

***

Kate looks…different. Lydia ushers her into Stiles’ office a little after 1PM on Thursday, and he almost doesn’t recognize her. Her hair is cropped to above her shoulders, she’s tanned several shades darker than he would have expected possible, and she grins at him with something just too far from actual happiness when she takes a seat right on his desk and braces her feet on the edge of his chair.

“Stiles,” she says, leaning into his personal space. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Stiles is used to people trying to make him uncomfortable. His entire world is about pressure: who can exert it, who crumbles under it. He hasn’t lost a game of chicken in his life and pretty much grew out of having any shame by the time he was sixteen. But there’s something about Kate – maybe the weird, definitely-not-jealousy reaction he had when she and Derek were on the marriage track, maybe the fact that he pretty much lives at Threat Level Midnight these days – that cultivates a cold, nasty feeling at the base of his spine.
He wriggles out of his chair, taking the extra breathing room to put up his professional walls as he circles to the other side of the room under the guise of closing the door. “Miss Argent, it’s good to see you again. How were your flights?”

Kate fully drops into Stiles’ chair, so she’s sitting behind his desk and he’s hovering near the door. “Really? Your team sent me on the run for over a year, and that’s the first thing you’re going to ask?”

Stiles leans against the door, trying to channel some of Isaac’s careful stillness into his posture. “You agreed to the terms of the arrangement and were handsomely compensated.”

“I already had money,” Kate says dismissively. “I agreed because you gave me a fancy speech about fulfilling my duty to the country.”

“And we appreciate everything you’ve been through,” Stiles says. “Lydia gave you the itinerary – as soon as we get you through the interview with Maddie and you sign the NDA, you’ll be free to return to your life in California.”

Kate smiles slowly. “California? Why would I want to go back to California?”

“You name has been completely cleared, but that doesn’t mean it’ll be easy for you in DC,” Stiles says. The knot in his spine is starting to send tendrils of unease along his ribcage. “People here are, by nature, suspicious and prone to holding grudges. Lydia’s already spoken with several well-regarded hospitals near your family’s home about holding positions for you –.”

“I’m not leaving,” Kate interrupts. “I get what you’re saying, but I’m not leaving. My life is here, my friends are here.”

“They might not be,” Stiles cautions. “A lot has happened in the year you were gone.”

“Seven countries, twenty-two cities,” Kate says.

“I’m sorry?”

“Seven countries, twenty-two cities,” Kate repeats. She stands and prowls toward him, moving in a way that draws his attention to her legs and cleavage. “That’s what my last fifteen months have been. I wasn’t in any one place longer than three weeks. I just got back. I’ll sign your NDA and do your interview, but I’m not moving again.”

Stiles’ brain whirs a little. Peter won’t be pleased. “Not right away, but maybe after a few months?”

“No, I’m going to stay. Better for you to keep an eye on me, right?” She winks, and maybe it’s because Stiles is already thinking about Peter, but that wink feels like Peter – overly sweet, a little oily, intended to mask something darker. This is not the Kate he remembers, who’d been so similar to Allison that they could have been sisters.

He clears his throat. “There’s an apartment set up for you six blocks from here. Lydia and I will come by tomorrow afternoon to prep you for the interview, which will take place on Monday morning. In the meantime, Miss Argent, I strongly suggest you keep to yourself.”

Kate raises her eyebrows. “You expect me to sit alone in an apartment all weekend?”

Stiles gracefully slides along the door and moves back toward his desk, still channeling Isaac into his motor control. “I expect you to take stock of the situation you find yourself in and make an
“Are you going to have one of your goons follow me to make sure I play by the rules?”

Stiles bites back his first retort (“I don’t have goons.”) and looks at her carefully, now injecting some of Lydia’s coldly calculating stare into his presence. “Do I need to?”

Kate stares back for just a second, then blinks and bursts into laughter. “No. No, God, no, I know I’m being an idiot. I’m sorry, I’ve just been on planes for twenty-seven hours and haven’t slept properly since Quito. Is there a burger place between here and the apartment? I’d kill for some chili fries and a root beer float.”

Stiles keeps his reaction to Kate’s polar shift in check, but all of his internal alarms are ringing. The Kate he’s looking at now is a complete 180 from the Kate who walked into his office – she’s light, happy, charming, everything Stiles remembered from last year. “Uh, yeah. It’s two blocks out of the way, but Kira can walk you there.”

“Great!” She grins and turns for the door, but pauses to look over her shoulder. “I do have a question, though – have you ever banished anyone else? Dropped them off the face of the earth, the way you did with me?”

Stiles is so caught off guard by the sudden switch that he answers honestly, before he has a chance to filter. “Once. About three years before you.”

“Huh. Where’d she end up?”

The twinge of discomfort in Stiles’ spine flares a warning, because they did send Kali to South America. Isaac and Scott know where she is, though – there’s no way Kali and Kate would have ever been in the same country, let alone crossed paths. “Somewhere far away.”

“Any chance she’ll be making a return trip, like yours truly?”

The most recent report on Kali was that she’d found herself a lovely Bolivian girlfriend and didn’t particularly seem to mind the fact that she was unable to travel more than 50 kilometers from their rural village without incurring a visit from Isaac. “It’s highly unlikely.”

Kate smiles again. “That’s not a ‘no.’”

Then she’s out the door, and Stiles is left at his desk trying to remember if he’d actually told Kate that the previous banish-ee was a woman before Kate started calling her “she.”

December, Year Four of Talia Hale’s First Term (0.5 years ago)

Being friends with Stiles, Derek thinks, must be what it’s like to stand in the eye of a hurricane. There’s chaos in his peripheral vision no matter which way he looks, and though he’s safe where he stands, three steps in any direction will sweep him out into the storm.

Stiles hosts a small Halloween party, and Derek finds him in the bedroom, staring at a picture of Lydia and Allison drinking coffee. Stiles stuffs the picture away, laughing, and redirects the
In November, when Derek drops by the Stilinski & Associates office to say hi after returning from his mom’s campaign trail, there’s a massive box of colored Post-its on Stiles’ desk. Derek asks about them in jest, and Stiles fumbles an answer about buying in bulk.

Later in November, Scott shows up unannounced at Derek’s apartment.

“Look,” Derek says, standing back to let him in. “If this is about me hurting Stiles again –.”

“It’s not,” Scott says. “You know my opinion on that. Stiles told me about what he said to you at the debate and at Fox & Hole. When it comes to you, Stiles can take care of himself and then some.”

“Okay,” Derek says carefully. “Then what’s going on?”

Scott tucks his hands into his pockets, looking enormously uncomfortable. “I’m not the guy that does this,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m not the guy that goes behind his best friend’s back to ask someone he doesn’t even like for help. I’m not that guy.”

“Scott. What’s going on?”

“I’m worried about Stiles,” Scott says, squeezing his eyes closed like he won’t have to remember this moment if he doesn’t see it happen. “There are…work things. Things at work that are bad for him. And I’m worried that he’s not dealing with it. Not dealing with it well, anyway.”

Derek blinks in surprise and sits down at his bar. “He doesn’t talk to me about work.”

“I know,” Scott says. “He wouldn’t, and he shouldn’t, but I know you guys are trying to be friends so you’ve been hanging out, and can you just…keep an eye on him?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking me to do, Scott.” Derek’s not trying to be difficult, but this doesn’t make much sense. Yeah, Stiles has seemed more stressed than usual, but Scott’s faith in Stiles to handle anything thrown at him is unshakeable. Isn’t it?

Scott looks up at the ceiling. “You know about the panic attacks. It’s been…it’s been getting worse. And he’s not, he won’t – he isn’t talking about it the way he needs to. Which means that it’ll only get worse, which means he’ll talk even less. And I can’t be there for him all the time, because he won’t let me. So when you guys are together, just…watch out for him.”

Derek nods slowly. “I…I’ll try. Want me to let you know if I see something?”

“No, fuck, I’m not asking you to spy on him and report back to me,” Scott says. “You know how he had ADHD as a kid? He still gets stuck sometimes. Locked on. Fixated. And he can’t always break himself out of it. He’s working so hard to keep all of us safe that he isn’t taking care of himself.”

“Keep all of us safe from what?”

“Don’t, Derek,” Scott sighs. “Just don’t. I don’t like you, but I think I have to trust you with this. With him. And he’s my best friend, Derek. He’s my brother. He needs us, but he can’t see that he
needs us and he wouldn’t admit it even if he did. Don’t fuck this up.”

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“Have I mentioned that your family throws awesome parties?” Stiles says, stumbling a little as he crosses the threshold into Derek’s New Orleans loft. “Seriously. That was even better than last year. Where did your dad even find two dozen live swans?”

“He has an animal procurement guy,” Derek answers, doing plenty of his own stumbling on his way to the kitchen. He and Stiles are two months in to Project BFF, as Stiles calls it, and there’s a chance they both might have gone a little heavy-handed on the champagne and eggnog to ease the discomfort at attending the HaleEnt Christmas party together.

“You’re kidding,” Stiles says, accepting a glass of water and chugging it before throwing himself haphazardly onto the couch and shucking his tie. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

Derek drains his own glass and lowers himself into the armchair. “Not kidding. When I started at Harvard, I looked through a complete list of HaleEnt job titles to make sure I was aiming for the role I wanted. Animal Procurement Specialist. We also employ two full-time painters whose entire job is to fly around the country and touch up the walls.”

“Your life is unreal,” Stiles announces. He wriggles until his head is hanging over the side of the couch, legs thrown up over the back. “Did you have fun?”

“Most fun I’ve ever had at one of those,” Derek says, and it’s true – he feels like his life is finally on track. He’s happily out of the closet; Laura and Cora haven’t chewed him out for anything in over a month; the DC branch is showing better numbers than he’d even hoped for in Q4; he sees Daniel a few times a week; he and Stiles are developing a comfortable rhythm that centers around baseball and pretending they can cook.

And if every so often Stiles does something like give him a sparkling upside-down smile, completely at home on Derek’s couch, and mentions wanting waffles for breakfast and it makes Derek’s heart beat a little faster, well, that’s no one’s business but his own.

And if he maybe opens the app that’s keeping a running countdown to next year’s October 16th and uses the number he sees as a mantra, that’s definitely no one’s business but his own.

Because this is the eye of the hurricane. They’ve wrapped themselves in a delicate balance, and as much as Derek finds himself taking extra-long showers these days, he knows that they need this. They know each other well from both campaigns, but this is different – they’re figuring out how they fit together. As long as Derek ignores the questions about S&A that he can’t ask because Stiles won’t answer, as long as neither of them says or does anything to push them into dangerous territory, as long as Stiles keeps giving Derek the chance to prove that he’s changed, they’re okay. They’re friends. It works.

But Derek’s not an idiot. He knows that pretending those questions don’t exist doesn’t make them go away. He knows that there’s something treacherous and bigger in Stiles’ life, something he’s just an ancillary part of. Stiles extends the calm and the still and the protection to the people he cares about and keeps the storm at bay through sheer force of will, but it’s starting to splinter.
He flicks the TV on and scrolls until he finds a channel playing the Claymation Rudolph movie Stiles is weirdly obsessed with. They watch in silence until Stiles falls asleep, and Derek gently adjusts him into a proper sleeping position so he doesn’t wake up with a crick in his neck.

Chapter End Notes

I'm kind of in love with how this chapter turned out.

All chapter titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.
Kate takes a sip of her wine and peers at him speculatively. “When’s the last time you ditched the bodyguards?”

“Luke and Chen?” On reflex, Derek glances to the corner booth where Chen is seated and probably sending minute-by-minute updates to Luke, who’s watching the restaurant’s perimeter. “It’s been a few years, I guess. Why?”

Kate flags down their water and babbles something in Portuguese that the guy responds to with a sly wink. “Because you, Derek Samuel Hale, need to get out of your head.”

May, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

Of all the things Derek thought he’d be doing a few weeks after arriving back in DC, watching Kate converse in fluent Portuguese with their waiter was not high on the list.

“São Paulo foi o meu favorito, é claro,” she says, then seems to notice Derek staring at her. “Me desculpe, eu estou sendo indelicado. Apenas os aperitivos para agora, obrigado.”

“You pick things up here and there,” Kate says breezily.

“You’re not ever going to tell me where you were for the past year, are you?”

“Didn’t you watch my interview on Monday? All the glamorous details of my time away that are fit for public consumption were laid out pretty clearly. There’s even an interactive timeline on the website.”

Derek’s seen the website – you can drag a little stick-figure Kate all over South America and read popups about the time she spent in each city and how it was all part of a grand plan to keep the American people happy, to lull the true criminal – Claire Collins, Claudia Stilinski, whatever her real name is – into complacency so she could be captured.

If Derek didn’t recognize the user interface from the site as Kira’s unique programming style, he would almost, almost believe that everything is above-board. But Kira’s involved, which means S&A is involved, which means Stiles is involved, which means…something. He’s still trying to piece together what exactly is significant about the fact that Stiles is, for some reason, handling Kate’s reintegration to society.
But there’s something there. He’s sure of it.

“Earth to Derek,” Kate says, waving her hand in front of his face. “What’s going on with you? That’s the second time you’ve zoned out on me since we sat down.”

“Sorry,” Derek says, blinking away some of the crazier conspiracy theories that swirl threateningly just beyond the edges of his vision. “I’m having trouble keeping my mind in one place these days.”

Kate takes a sip of her wine and peers at him speculatively. “When’s the last time you ditched the bodyguards?”

“Luke and Chen?” On reflex, Derek glances to the corner booth where Chen is seated and probably sending minute-by-minute updates to Luke, who’s watching the restaurant’s perimeter. “It’s been a few years, I guess. Why?”

Kate flags down their water and babbles something in Portuguese that the guy responds to with a sly wink. “Because you, Derek Samuel Hale, need to get out of your head.”

“And running away from my Secret Service detail is going to help with that?” Derek watches her carefully. There’s something different about this Kate, something…wilder.

“I think it might,” Kate says. “You need to stop being the President’s Son for a little while. We’ll stay local, only be gone for a few hours. They’ll barely have time to notice you’re missing.”

The waiter reappears and discretely places a white paper bag on the seat next to Kate. She slides a bill into his hand and then looks across the table to Derek, eyes twinkling. “I’m going out the front door, like I left something in my car that I need. You wait two minutes, then go to the bathroom – it’s on the same hallway as the kitchen, and there’s a staff exit behind the ovens.”

And then she’s gone, bag of food held at an angle so that Chen won’t be able to see it around her body, and Derek’s left sitting in the booth by himself, considering.

He’s thirty-two. He’s a responsible adult. Luke and Chen both got reamed the last time he did this, and they’d doubled his detail for three months. His family’s had enough scares in the past few years to last them the rest of their lives. Slipping his bodyguards is a silly, petty, unnecessary risk.

On the other hand, everyone seems to forget that he and Daniel’s unit once spent nine weeks on the wrong side of the DMZ at the Iraqi border, and they made it out just fine.

Okay, no one really forgets that. Because only a very small pool of people know about it in the first place. Because they were definitely not supposed to be there. Because it’s definitely not something he still, sometimes, has the occasional screaming nightmare about.

It’s the principle of the thing. He can take care of himself.

But, because he’s thirty-two and a responsible adult, he scribbles a quick Back at my apartment by ten, phone is on, please don’t send Homeland Security after me across a few sugar packets and leaves them next to his fork.

Kate’s master plan to break Derek free of his mental constraints turns out to be skipping stones across a pond in a park less than half a mile from the restaurant.

It’s weirdly helpful. It’s also weird how comfortable he is spending time with someone that he
vehemently hated for well over a year.

“The most important thing I learned in the past year,” Kate says, whipping a pebble six bounces out, “besides how to shear an alpaca and what sources of water won’t give you tapeworms, is that sitting still will drive you crazy.”

“Is that a metaphor?” Derek sifts through a handful of stones, searching for one with rounded edges and a smooth base.

“Probably. But I mean it literally at the moment. Going to your job, sitting at your desk, eating at the same restaurants and talking to the same people – doesn’t it make you want to scream?”

“You never had a desk job to begin with.”

“We’re talking about you, numbskull,” Kate says, kicking a bit of water at him with her bare feet. “Although, yes, I’ve been back for two weeks and having an approved social circle that consists entirely of the Stilinski & Associates staff and my ex-fiancé is already starting to wear on me.”

Derek makes a bad stone choice; it wobbles through the air like a drunk duck and kerplunks into the water after two skips. “How’s that going? Working with them again?”

Kate wades out of the water and takes a seat in the grass next to her shoes. “You can ask about him, you know.”

“Ask about who?”

She tosses a handful of pebbles at him; they scatter across his shoulders and lower back. “I’m not blind. Wasn’t then, am not now. Watching you and Stiles dance around each other is enough to fulfill anyone’s lifetime requirement of second-hand angst.”

Derek turns to her, stricken. “It was that obvious?”

Kate shrugs. “It helped that I knew where to look. Laura may have prodded my suspicions along.”

“I hate her,” Derek says, collapsing into the grass next to Kate. “What sort of sister sabotages her brother’s engagement?”

“The kind that wants you to be happy,” Kate says. “Anyway, to answer your unspoken question: Stiles is annoyingly intelligent. Irritatingly observant. Frustratingly difficult to rattle.”

“You’ve been trying to rattle him?”

Kate waves a hand dismissively. “I sit in that office twelve hours a day while they vet my answers to emails, Twitter questions, fan mail – you know, I get fan mail? I’m bored out of my mind until I can get my medical license reinstated. I have to do something to entertain myself.”

Derek has a sudden mental image of Kate trying to push Stiles’ buttons and Stiles, locked into full professional form, shutting her down ruthlessly. “He’s okay, then?”

Not that I should care. Not that I do care. Not that I’ll ever be able to trust him again.

Kate softens, and it’s the first glimpse Derek has had of the Kate he knew a year ago, beneath the rougher, blunter exterior that she has now. “He’s tired. I don’t think he’s sleeping very much. I’m still not exactly sure what S&A does, but I think they’re doing more of it than before – more meetings, more clients. It’s probably higher-profile stuff, too, since your uncle’s around so much.”
A little alarm bell, something Derek equates with unexpected enemy movement from his Air Force days, chimes softly in the back of his head. “Peter’s there?”

“Yeah, in Stiles’ office,” Kate says, twisting around to look at him at the abrupt change in tone of his voice. “Why? Shouldn’t he be?”

“Derek?” A figure jogs up out of the deepening twilight.

“Daniel?” Derek pushes to his feet. “What’re you doing here?”

“Out for a run,” Daniel says, tugging an earbud free and gesturing at his sweat-ringed USAF t-shirt. “Saw you from the other side of the pond. Who’s your friend?”

“Kate Argent,” Kate says, popping up and brushing her hand off on her leg before offering it. “You’re Daniel Masterson? Derek’s co-captain?”

“Before he ditched me for the incredibly boring life of a civilian,” Daniel confirms, shaking her hand. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, just wanted to say hi.”

“I didn’t even know you were back,” Derek says. “I thought you were still…” He trails off, uncertain how much of Daniel’s orders are supposed to be public knowledge. Granted, Daniel probably wouldn’t have told Derek he was shipping out to Bahrain if the orders were classified, but Derek knows that Daniel still considers him inner circle – even if it’s not technically true anymore.

“Got back last week,” Daniel jumps in. “Once we got the cargo dissembled and shipped out, there really wasn’t much of a need for eyes in the sky. I was stuck at the base with paperwork until yesterday.”

“Can’t imagine what you’re talking about,” Kate says, smirking.

Daniel’s eyes flicker over her, a seemingly-casual glance that Derek recognizes as a threat assessment. “How are you adjusting to life as a free woman, Ms. Argent?”

“Call me Kate,” Kate says. “And I can’t complain.”

Daniel cocks his head to the side. “Can’t you? I’d think that being forced to spend a year of your life running from practically every law enforcement agency on the planet might make a person a little bitter.”

“I wasn’t forced to do anything,” Kate says, her eyes narrowing just past the point of friendly. “I was asked to do something beneficial for my country. I’d think you’d be familiar with that situation, Captain.”

“Major, actually,” Daniel says, and Derek isn’t sure when the atmosphere took a definite shift toward hostile. “And believe me, I understand the sacrifices it takes to serve one’s country.”

Kate’s on the verge of responding when her phone buzzes audibly from her purse, and she checks her watch with a sigh. “Well, fun as this has been, that’s the alarm reminding me that I’ve got a curfew until all of this blows over. Derek, call me about that Nationals game. Daniel, it was…it was nice to meet you.”

She slips into her shoes and heads off toward the street. Derek turns back to Daniel, torn between confused and irritated. “Want to tell me what all that was about?”

“I don’t like her,” Daniel says simply, pulling a heel up behind him to stretch his quad.
“What – that – from that thirty second interaction?”

“What do you know about Argent Arms, Derek?”

Derek stiffens. “She’s not her father. She’s not even involved in the family business.”

Daniel raises an eyebrow. “Oh, because she told you she’s not? You’re smarter than that.”

Derek is suddenly, overwhelmingly exhausted. “So, what, you think she’s using me? Trying to build a connection between Argent Arms and the White House? Do you honestly think that I haven’t run through that scenario already? That I haven’t run through every possible scenario with the Secret Service?”

“Speaking of the Secret Service,” Daniel says, looking like he’s already won, “where are Luke and Chen?”

“That’s not – it’s not – I can take care of myself,” Derek says, aware of how childish he sounds.

Daniel holds up his hands in a placating gesture. “I don’t remember calling that into question. All I asked is where your security detail is.”

“My phone is on,” Derek says stubbornly. “They could track me if they really needed –.”

“Argent Arms has been unofficially linked to illegal weapon stores on both sides of the Crescent Conflict, Derek,” Daniel interrupts. “I was there. I watched more crates stamped with that silver bullet be pulled out of bunkers and sent to processing than I could count.”

Derek shakes his head. “The Argents are internationally licensed arms dealers. They can’t help what’s done with supplies post-purchase. That’s Arms & Munitions 101.”

Daniel looks at him carefully. “You’re right. And Arms & Munitions 100 was learn to read potential buyers when you’re selling in unstable regions.”

“What are you saying?”

Daniel cranes his head back to look at the darkening sky. “D’you trust me, Kingpin?”

The use of a callsign is a dirty play and they both know it, but it’s effective. “Don’t be a jackass,” Derek sighs. “You know I do.”

“The Crescent’s in bad shape,” Daniel says. “We got the WMD’s out, but the whole region’s about one wrong word away from clusterfucking itself into oblivion, and the Argents are involved somehow. I can’t prove it, but…they are. And your girl spent the last year off the grid in South America, which isn’t exactly a paragon of peace and harmony these days either.”

Derek lets the words and implications turn over in his head. It’s been awhile since he thought like this, since he played Actions and Consequences on a global scale. Yes, Gerard Argent has come on strong the couple times they’ve met. Yes, the lack of public information about Kate’s time in South America leaves a lot of details to the imagination. Yes, Senator Chris Argent had been a vocal supporter of an aggressive campaign in the Crescent Conflict, a campaign that matched up nearly point-for-point with what Peter had privately counseled, according to several rage-fueled vent sessions of Laura’s back when everything was escalating and their mother was in a coma.

Kate had admitted to seeing Peter in Stiles’ office.
Stiles had been the one to set Derek up with Kate.

Stiles’ best friend has been dating that other Argent, Allison, for years.

Stiles had helped Kate stay hidden in South America.

Stiles’ mother had tried to kill Derek’s mother. Twice.

Stiles is very, very good at keeping secrets. At disappearing what he doesn’t want found. At fixing.

Derek doesn’t know what it all adds up to. He’s getting dangerously close to thinking that all of this, every last part of it, somehow comes back to Stiles, and there’s a conclusion on the other side of that door that he doesn’t want to acknowledge. Something irrevocable is going to happen the second he puts the words *Stiles* and *treason* together in a sentence, even if it’s just in his head.

“Hey!” Daniel says sharply, snapping Derek out of his spiral. “What the fuck’s going on with you?”

“I don’t – I need to go home,” Derek says, digging his phone out of his pocket. It’s almost ten. “I need to – I’ll talk to you later.”

And then he’s jogging away from Daniel, brain still trying and failing to assemble a puzzle even though he’s becoming increasingly certain that seeing the final picture will kill him.

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“It’s a girl,” Cora says, beaming, sweeping through the door of his apartment. “It’s a girl, I’m having a girl.”

“Cora, it’s 7AM on Saturday,” Derek groans, glaring weakly across the hall to where he’s sure Chen or Luke is enjoying watching him suffer through 3H’s peephole. This is payback for ditching them last night – letting his little sister in at an ungodly hour.

“And if you had answered your phone last night like a *responsible* older brother, you’d already have this information and I wouldn’t have needed to stop by,” Cora says, making a beeline for his kitchen and flinging open cabinets. “What decaffeinated teas do you have?”

“Almost definitely none.” Derek drops himself onto one of his barstools and puts his head on the counter. There’s really no way to explain that he didn’t pick up last night because he tried to stop himself from thinking the only three ways he knows how: obsessive exercising, marathon gaming, and excessive drinking.

There’s a fourth way, but it involves a willing second participant, and the only other person Derek’s dick is even remotely interested in these days is the subject of the no-good-very-bad-must-avoid thoughts. So it was a no-go on that front, and now Derek is sore, hungover, and there’s a dent in the wall from throwing his controller.

He’s not exactly up for visitors.

Especially visitors who are his four-years-younger, life-on-track, happily-expecting-a-child, married-to-the-love-of-her-life sister.
“Well, someone’s a ray of fucking sunshine this morning,” Cora says, slamming a cabinet shut particularly loudly. Probably just to hurt him. “Did you even hear me? I’m having a girl.”

Derek blinks a few times, waiting for the words to filter through to the less alcohol-saturated parts of his brain. “You’re having a girl.”


“You’re having a girl!” Derek shouts when it finally clicks into place. He tries to throw himself around the counter to hug her, but ends up slamming his hip into the corner and nearly braining himself on the fridge. It’s a solid three seconds before his equilibrium settles out, and then he wraps Cora up his arms and they do an awkward little jumping dance around his kitchen that makes his head hurt even worse but is somehow completely worth it.

They settle down when it becomes clear that Derek’s going to become intimately acquainted with his toilet bowl if the bouncing continues, but Cora’s still radiating joy when she squeezes his hand and asks, “Will you be a godparent?”

Derek sweeps her into another hug. “Of course I will. Of course.”

“Great,” she says, squirming out of his grasp and laughing. “Okay, I’ve got to go – I need to go ask the other godparent-to-be.”

“Laura? Tell me it’s not Laura.”

Cora lets out a bright little laugh, and this, if anything, should be Derek’s dead giveaway – Cora only laughs like that when she’s planning something. “Sean and I would like for our kid to actually survive, so no, it’s not Laura.”

“Who, then?”

Cora grins at him from halfway out the door. “Stiles.”

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**February, Year Four of Talia Hale’s First Term (1.28 years ago)**

All Derek can think after leaving Stiles’ hospital room is, *He read the card.*

*He read the card, and he didn’t call.*

“Come on,” Laura says gently, after taking one look at his face. She threads her arm through his, and Cora presses up against his other side. “Let’s go get drunk.”

“Ms. Hale, that’s not –.”

“Luke,” Laura snaps. “You will drive us to a liquor store. You will take us back to Derek’s apartment. Then you and Chen and my guys and Cora’s guys can set up all the fucking tripwires and security cameras and Home Alone-style traps you want and you can sit on us for all I care, but the three of us are getting drunk.”

It takes Derek at least two hours to relay everything Stiles said to his sisters, mostly because Derek
keeps getting stuck in shame spirals and partially because Cora mixes an extremely heady Old
Fashioned that gets progressively stronger as the night wears on. He replays Stiles saying “You
made me feel like I was less of a person than you, like I didn’t count for as much as you did” on
loop in his head during his fourth drink, when Laura and Cora order way too much Brazilian food
from this place down the road. On drink seven, he finally, finally explains to his sisters that, in his
own incredibly fucked-up and emotionally stunted way, he did what he did on Election Day
because he thought Stiles deserved better. He throws up between drinks eight and nine, and when
Laura puts him to bed he has feverish nightmares of Stiles bleeding out in the Capitol, Cora’s
bloodstained, horrified face when the Secret Service brought her to the bunker with whispers of
“Stiles, they’re not sure, went right through him,” Stiles looking at Derek on Election Day, Stiles
panting Derek’s name in praise in any number of indistinguishable hotel rooms across the country.

Wednesday brings more of the same, since they’re under Secret Service-enforced house arrest until
there’s a suspect in custody. On top of that they’re not allowed to contact anyone from their
respective jobs in case a co-worker is somehow involved in the assassination attempt, so the Hale
siblings day drink, play video games, and watch six straight hours of Chopped. They take breaks
for Derek to drown in guilt and for Cora to call Sean, who’s under guard at his parents’ house in
Pennsylvania.

It’s not, by any means, a mature reaction to the events of the past week. It’s not an efficient way to
cope with guilt, it doesn’t really help any of them process their emotions. It’s not like it makes
anything better by any metric, not even in the most minute or unimportant way.

“We’re the Hales,” Laura scowls at some point on Wednesday afternoon, when Derek tries to
express this sentiment. “We win prizes for being accomplished public speakers, for winning soccer
tournaments, for writing eloquently on party relations. We don’t do well
with actual human things.”

It’s not until Thursday morning, when Derek wakes up with a raging hangover, that he realizes he
hasn’t spoken to or thought about Kate since seeing Stiles at the hospital. He calls her, holding the
phone well away from his head because since when is the ringer so damn loud, but his calls go
right to voicemail and his texts stay at Sent, not Read.

He’s properly worried by midday. It’s not like Kate to not answer for so long; even when she’s
working forty-eight hour shifts, she normally responds during breaks or downtime. Cora finally
awakens from the sleep of the dead and starts banging around his kitchen, looking for brunch
supplies, and he turns on the TV to drown out the sound.

“Investigators are now saying that the fingerprints of Katherine Argent, Derek Hale’s fiancé, have
been found inside the barrel of the sniper rifle used during last week’s assassination attempt,” the
news anchor on screen reports, and Derek feels his already tender stomach drop three feet. Little
pictures of him and Kate pop up on the right side of the anchor’s head. “Ms. Argent was initially
taken into protection with the rest of the First Family following the shooting, but has not been
heard from since being released from custody early Tuesday morning.”

“Derek?” Cora yawns, poking her head into the living room and blinking blearily. “Are they
talking about the shooting? Where’s the orange juice?”

“It was Kate,” Derek says. He feels almost numb – his stomach and his head hurt too much for
complete release. “It was – she’s the – it was Kate.”

Derek pretty much falls apart for a few days. He gets hauled in for hours and hours of questioning
about his relationship with Kate, and he only manages to stick to Stiles’ invented backstory for them because Lydia and Stiles drilled him on it so many times that his natural reaction to questions about how he and Kate fell in love is to lie. He gets asked repeatedly about every little thing Kate did or said in the time they spent together, every call she made, every text she received, and Derek can’t decide if he wants to be able to remember something retrospectively damning or not.

On one hand, he should have known. There should be something – anything – in his memory that at least hints towards Kate’s actions. If he can remember the barest clue, they’ll have something to go on. Some connection that makes this all makes sense, that makes it feel more like a logical, linear progression and less like he’s looking at his life through a kaleidoscope. Yes, it would mean that he missed some crucial sign, that he could have prevented the danger to his family, the deaths of the civilians and agents. There was an eight-year-old girl injured in the shooting who made it two whole nights in the surgical ICU before “succumbing to her wounds,” and Derek feels the weight of her death around his neck like a noose. He has to be able to remember something. He has to help find her.

On the other hand, and what Derek is starting to understand after three days of exhaustive, repetitive interrogations, is that there’s nothing to remember. Every memory he has of Kate is innocuous, down to the tiniest, pettiest detail. She was never overly interested in his mother’s politics or schedule, but she wasn’t uninterested. She talked about her work at the hospital, her colleagues, her father’s business, her niece’s restaurant. The Air Force trained Derek to be observant, to look for clues that someone isn’t who they say they are, and Kate tripped precisely none of Derek’s warning bells.

It fucks with Derek’s head. Badly. His innate trust issues ramp up by a factor of ten.

A few days later, there’s a new person hanging around the Stilinski & Associates office. Stiles introduces her as Malia.

Chapter End Notes

Well. My real life exploded in a very messy way, and I’m not going to apologize for that. But to make up for it, you’re getting every remaining chapter of this series at once, so...even steven? I solemnly swear that I will, at some point, catch up on comments.

The Portuguese in this chapter is courtesy of Google Translate, so...no promises.

All chapter titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.
it's all fun and games 'til somebody loses their mind

Chapter Summary

There’s something extremely heady about two hundred people turning up to celebrate your birthday, Stiles decides, draining his whiskey sour. And it’s proof of how out of it he’s been that Scott and Lydia were able to pull this off without him noticing a damn thing. Matt, Stiles’ favorite reporter, takes his empty glass and returns with a full one without missing a beat in some outrageously uncoordinated dance move he’s just barely pulling off.

“Totally worth signing an NDA!” Matt shouts, kissing Stiles on the forehead sloppily before shimmying back into the crowd.

Stiles watches him go, stunned, then turns Lydia. “NDA?”

Lydia purses her lips. “You didn’t honestly think I’d let this event transpire without making every single guest sign a specialized non-disclosure agreement, did you?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“It’s your own rule,” Scott shouts, slapping a glittery top hat onto Stiles’ head. “Never miss an excuse to celebrate, especially a legitimate one. Happy birthday, dude.”

Stiles gives up protesting and lets himself be towed further into Cork, Stock, and Barrel, which the owners apparently closed to the public for Stiles’ 30th birthday. He genuinely likes this bar, loves the owners and staff, and knows that his team needs a chance to blow off steam.

Plus, it’s not every day a guy turns thirty.

Also, he sees Peter in a corner booth, acting like he’s just having a casual beer with a few guys Stiles recognizes from the bullpen, so he supposes they’re not breaking any B6-13 rules. Someone would probably be bleeding if that were the case.

God, Stiles needs a drink. Or seven.

Lydia, creature of sheer perfection that she is, manifests at that moment and presses a shot into one of his hands and a whiskey sour into the other. He downs the shot and then winds his free arm around her shoulders.

“You’re not allowed to be mad,” She calls, pressing her lips close to his eye and still raising her voice to be heard over the music. “I know surprise parties aren’t really your cup of tea, but Scott insisted we make a big deal out of tonight.”

“Do I know this many people?” Stiles asks, scanning the crowd. Surprisingly, even with the bar
packed, he recognizes almost every face. He waves at Laura, Cora, and Sean, as well as a group of students from GW he guest-lectured for once and subsequently found had grown into a small fan base. “How do this many people know me?”

Lydia’s magnificent eyebrows furrow. “Don’t even try any of that self-deprecating crap tonight, Stilinski. Between people from the pressroom, campaign people, White House and Hill staffers, friends of clients, and people you’re just independently friends with, the guest list actually exceeds bar capacity. Luckily, the district fire chief owes you a favor, too.”

There’s something extremely heady about two hundred people turning up to celebrate your birthday, Stiles decides, draining his whiskey sour. And it’s proof of how out of it he’s been that Scott and Lydia were able to pull this off without him noticing a damn thing. Matt, Stiles’ favorite reporter, takes his empty glass and returns with a full one without missing a beat in some outrageously uncoordinated dance move he’s just barely pulling off.

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Lydia purses her lips. “You didn’t honestly think I’d let this event transpire without making every single guest sign a specialized non-disclosure agreement, did you?”

“Lydia, I love you,” Stiles says.

She smiles indulgently. “I know, sweetie. Now go have fun. Find me or Scott when you’re ready to go home.”

“Wait! Where are Isaac and Kira?”

Lydia, two steps away and already too far for words, just points to the far end of the bar. Stiles follows her finger over the dance floor to the raised DJ platform, where Kira is wearing enormous oversized headphones and switching out tracks on the turntable. On instinct, he lets his eyes drift upwards, and yup, there’s Isaac – perched in the rafters, keeping an eye on everyone. He offers a little wave, and his phone buzzes almost immediately.

Isaac (permanent) (10:03PM) Happy Birthday.

Me (10:03PM) Thanks. You okay?

Isaac (permanent) (10:03PM) I can see everyone from here.

Me (10:04PM) Okay. Let me know if you need me, Hawkeye.

He pockets his phone and just has time to get hugged by a group of staffers from Stollenberg’s office before it buzzes again. The buzz continues, though, meaning it’s a call instead of a text, and he frowns at the Beacon Hills Sheriff Department ID that pops up. He thought he cleared out that contact a long, long time ago. He struggles back to the door of the bar and lets himself out into the relative quiet.

“Stiles Stilinski,” he says, shutting the door behind him.
“Stiles? It’s Tara.”

“Hi, Sheriff Graeme,” Stiles says, pretending the words don’t stick in his throat, pretending that even seeing this ID on his phone isn’t enough to make his breathing get a little sketchy. “What’s going on?”

“Stiles, you need to come back,” Tara says. “There’s been a fire.”

In the end, he travels back to Beacon Hills alone. Lydia and Scott fight him on it, but there’s no denying the facts: if Peter calls them in, enough of them need to be around to complete the job or Peter will dream up some horribly inventive way to punish them. So he flies alone, he makes the drive alone, and he stands alone outside the charred frame of his childhood home, flecks of ash blowing up against his shoes.

He has the arson and damage reports on his phone, a birthday gift from Tara when he landed. He can’t seem to make his feet move forward – maybe the ash is melting the rubber soles of his shoes into the sidewalk, permanently binding him to this place – so he reads them now. The words jumble together, all jargon and legal terms, but he did enough internet research on the plane to get the gist of it.

The fire started in the southwest corner of the house. The living room. Spread to the kitchen and the study. Burned hot and fast for half an hour. Damage contained to the first floor, but building deemed unstable. Not condemned, but demolition recommended.

*Electrical fire*, the bottom of the arson report reads. *Accidental.*

Stiles closes both reports, pulls up the BHSD from his recent contacts, and follows the switchboard until he gets Tara’s desk phone. It’s only 5AM, after all.

“Sheriff Graeme, it’s me. Stiles. Stilinski. I had all electricity to the house shut off the month after my dad died. It wasn’t accidental. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

It’s a long day. Stiles is running on two hours of sleep and liberal doses of caffeine as he wades through discussions with the arson investigator, the insurance company, and a contractor cousin of Deputy McDonnell who can handle the demolition. At dusk, he checks in to one of the less seedy motels at the county border, takes a quick shower, and makes the short drive to a place he hasn’t been in almost four years: the Beacon Hills Cemetery.

He can still feel the ash in his lungs as he forces himself to step through the gate. He’s been to the plot exactly twice – his mom’s funeral, his dad’s funeral – but his feet find it like he’s been there a hundred times before, and he wonders how often he’s dreamed about this walk without remembering it. The markers and gravestones he passes feel as familiar as his own fingers, the grass under his shoes worn into a path of which he knows every inch.

His legs stop moving of their own accord, his knees bend without his permission, and then he’s sitting in from of his father’s headstone, tears in his eyes and embers in his throat.

“Hey, Dad,” he says, the words searing his insides on the way out. “It’s been awhile.”

And then he sits in silence, because, really, what is there to say? Stiles stopped being religious a long, long time ago, and he knows, objectively, that the skeleton and decomposing body buried
beneath him aren’t his father. Not anymore.

“But this is what people do in movies, right?” He says out loud, winding a dandelion stem around his finger and flinching when it snaps. “They come to gravesites to talk to their loved ones. Even though it’s illogical and pointless. Even though it’s nothing like – God, you know, that’s not even her?” Stiles gestures angrily at the headstone next to him, the one that reads Claudia Jane Stilinski, beloved wife and mother. “That’s not Mom. Of course you know, you probably figured it out the second we stuck you in the ground and you realized that the person lying next to you for all eternity was definitely, definitely not your wife.”

Stiles lets out a crazy-sounding little laugh that echoes mockingly back at him from across the empty grounds. “The house burned down, Dad. I don’t know – I wasn’t here. I don’t know what happened. But they’re going to knock it down next week, and I can’t – it’s like losing you again. And losing Mom, even though we actually didn’t lose Mom, although I’m not even sure if we ever really had her in the first place –.”

He takes a deep, shuddering breath, trying to imagine what his Psych 407 professor would say if she saw him in this state. Something about incomplete grieving complicated by an anxiety disorder and external stressors beyond one’s control.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Stiles says, and it’s a relief to say the words even if they don’t change the circumstances. “I don’t – I’m not even sure if I’m one of the good guys anymore, Dad. I thought I was, I thought we were, but…maybe we’re not. Maybe it’s just not that simple. Maybe we’re…in the way of something we don’t understand. Maybe Mom’s right, maybe Peter’s right, maybe…God, I don’t know.”

He sets his elbows against his knees, tucks his face into his palms, and breathes. He’s not quite sobbing, but every breath hitches numerous times on its way in and out and he imagines the air as marbles rolling up and down his ribcage from the inside of his lungs. He wonders, if he was completely hollowed out and dried up, if someone could play a song on his ribs like a xylophone.

He doesn’t even notice there’s anyone else in the cemetery until she speaks, and he’s mad at himself for that longer than he’d like to admit.

“He’d make fun of us for this,” she says, a few graves off to his right. “For coming back here to him.”

“He wouldn’t,” Stiles says, the right-ness of what he’s saying spreading through him even as he tries to settle his heart rate. “He’d tell me that…that we do what we have to do to carry on. Even if that’s talking to a stone. He might hate you, though. Didn’t know who you were in life, doesn’t know who you are in death.”

“I think he knew,” she says, and her voice is closer this time. “Your father was a smart, intuitive man. I think some part of him always knew that I didn’t quite belong to his world.”

Stiles doesn’t have the faintest fucking clue what to say to that, so instead he asks the question that’s been leaving crop circles in his logic ever since he got the call from Tara. “Did you do this? Did you start the fire?”

“No,” she says, and this time she’s standing directly behind him. “No, but I think I know who did.”

“Did – did you kill Dad?” Stiles manages, and he’s horrified but not at all surprised to find that this is the question that breaks him. He stifles the sound by biting down so hard on his left knuckles that he breaks skin, but his mother wrenches his hand out of his mouth and holds his face firmly

...
between her hands.

“Bug,” she says, looking him dead in the eye. “Listen to me. I did not kill your father.”

“But it wasn’t an accident,” Stiles says slowly, reading the truth reflecting back at him. “The Sheriff of Beacon Hills doesn’t die in a convenience store hold-up.”

She lets go of him and walks a few steps away, staring at her own headstone. “There’s more to this than I can tell you now,” she says. “I have a plane to catch.”

“Bullet points, then,” Stiles forces out between gritted teeth. He is, of all possible emotions to be feeling right now, relieved. He’s never felt like his dad’s death made sense, has never been able to shake the feeling that there was something off about the way things happened. If nothing else – this means that there was a reason his dad died, right? Even if that reason is horrible and wrapped up in a million other plotlines, there’s a reason.

Claudia speaks to her headstone. “Peter searched for his daughter for a year and half before he found her. I’d been Command for eight months, and Malia was just a promising young agent with a tragic backstory when all of a sudden, a man claiming to be her father shows up at Wonderland’s front door. We nearly had him killed on the spot, but Peter Hale – it was a golden opportunity. We already knew that Talia would win the next election. So we read Peter in, and he rose quickly, and when my co-Command was killed – Peter was a logical choice.

“He found out about you and your father by accident. He knew that family was a vulnerability from personal experience, so he offered me two options: prove my loyalty to B6-13 by ordering a hit on one of you, or spend the rest of my life in the Pit and you’d both be killed.”

She shrugs. “I loved your father, but not as much as I felt compelled to protect you. It was an easy choice. I designed the strike myself. It was painless.”

Stiles is hyperventilating. Maybe choking on his tongue, or blood from biting his tongue. He might actually be drowning.

“He knew me already,” he says, the words coppery and sharp in his mouth. “Peter met me on the campaign, but didn’t know I was your son.”

“He only knew me as Claire Collins,” she says. “When you moved to DC after graduation to become White House Press Secretary, you put our wedding picture on your desk. It was enough.”

Stiles has to turn over onto his hands and knees to retch, but he hasn’t eaten all day and nothing comes up.

“I won’t apologize for making the choice I made,” she says softly, her hand rubbing between his shoulder blades. It sends another body-wracking shudder through him. “I was protecting you. I have always protected you.”

“You should’ve killed Peter,” Stiles chokes, grimacing against the taste of bile in his throat.

“I tried,” she says bluntly. “He gave the hearts of everyone I sent after him back to me, packaged up in little gift bags. Gruesome, but charismatic.”

He doesn’t stick around to watch the demolition. He does, however, drive his mother’s baby blue Jeep, miraculously undamaged save for the faint scent of smoke that he doubts will ever truly go
away, across the country. It takes four days, but by the time he’s back in DC Lydia’s secured him a
long-term parking space a few blocks from his apartment and there’s an updated arson report
waiting in his inbox confirming that yes, all the electricity to the house was off at the time of the
fire. The BHSD opens an official investigation. Stiles doesn’t expect them to find anything, but he
does start reading the notes in his baked goods more closely.

His first day back at work is Friday. Sitting on his desk is an insanely beautiful messenger bag –
the kind with a million pockets, made of high-quality material, probably outlandishly expensive
(confirmed by Lydia). His entire team swears they have no knowledge of its origin, and it’s only
when he’s transferring things from his current bag (eight years old, patched by duct tape and/or
safety pins more than once, generally looks like he used it to carry the One Ring to Mount Doom)
to the new one (because he’s not one to look a gift horse in the...bag? a gift bag in the mouth?) that
he finds a hidden pocket containing a single, plain index card.

* * *

_I bought this for you a long time ago. Figured you might as well have it. Happy birthday._

_Derek_

* * *

_August, Year Three of Talia Hale’s First Term (1.84 years ago)_

Cora gets married on a bright, brisk afternoon toward the end of August in the third year of their
mother’s administration. The formal reception is basically a political battleground over Talia’s gun
control bill, what with all the congressmen and legislators and other high-profile people that Cora
_had_ to invite or risk offending, and Derek quickly gets bored with all the hand shaking and the
posturing and the endless threats subtly veiled as social niceties.

“You’re signing up for a whole life of this,” Laura says in his ear when he collapses into a chair
next to her, finally having freed himself from an impossibly dull conversation about the gold
standard (of all things). “With that governor thing you and Mom have been talking about since
July. A whole life of boring conversations with manipulative people.”

“It’ll be well catered, at least,” Derek says, snatching a glass of champagne from a passing waiter
and pulling the rest of Laura’s cake towards him.

Laura harrumphs in agreement. “Where’s Paige?”

“She went home an hour ago. There’s only so long I can subject someone to this and still be able to
call on them as my friend date.”

“Yeah. Same with Eddie.” Laura looks out toward the dance floor, where Cora and Sean are still
spinning in a slow circle, completely insulated from everything happening around them. “Well. To
our little sister, the only one of us who’s ever had her shit together.”

Derek gently knocks the lip of his champagne glass against Laura’s. “We always knew she’d be
the one to get married first. She was holding down stable relationships in middle school, for
Christ’s sake.”
“Whereas you, dear brother, have only ever had relationships with your beards, and whereas I am completely relationship-averse. Quite the trifecta our parents got stuck with.”

Derek, as he usually does when someone mentions his relationship status, gets hit with a wave of Stiles-related flashbacks that make something unhappy sink claws into his kidney. “Yeah.”

"The sex I’ll take,” Laura continues, not in the least put off by Derek’s lackluster response. “But the relationships, the romance – meh. I can do without all of that.”

Derek pulls himself out of his head to say, “Why do I feel like you just told me something significant?”

“Everything I tell you is significant,” she says, narrowing her eyes.

“Laura, I –.”

“Derek, you need to come with me,” their mother says, sweeping into view atypically devoid of attendants.

“Mom, Laura and I were –.”

“Now, Derek,” Talia says, fixing him with the stare that somehow didn’t stop being effective when Derek turned 18. There should really be a law: when you become a legal adult, your parents shouldn’t be able to shame you into doing what they want with a single look. It would have to be a magical law, an emotional law. Maybe he should write it.

Maybe Derek’s attempt to subvert his boredom through copious amounts of champagne was more successful than he thought.

He follows his mother to the hotel suite set aside for the bride’s family, Luke trailing him and Agent Reyes, who intimidates Derek on some level he doesn’t quite understand, trailing her. Deaton is pacing concentric circles in front of the TV, speaking rapidly into his phone about some situation in the Middle East.

Talia motions Derek to the desk as Reyes closes the door quietly. Reyes stays outside; Luke, at a last minute nod from Derek, enters the room. Derek automatically follows his mother’s direction and ends up looking at a surface covered with pictures of him, Derek Hale, publicly heterosexual son of the President of the United States, in an over-crowded bar, having an interaction of a decidedly intimate nature with a man in a red hoodie.

Derek sobers up remarkably fast. “Where…?”

“Delivered to Deaton’s office in the middle of the day,” Talia says, her this-is-a-problem-and-I’m-going-to-fix-it voice in place. “It looks like the security footage has been corrupted.”

“Who -?”

“My turn for questions, Derek,” she says sharply. “Who is he?”

“I…I don’t know,” Derek confesses. He sits heavily in the desk chair, pulling one of the pictures – he’s got the guy pressed against a wall, shit fucking motherfucking – toward him. “I don’t remember. When are these from?”

“There’s a timestamp on the one in the corner, Madam President,” Deaton offers, angling his phone away from the conversation. “Early April of this year.”
Early April, Derek thinks, wracking his brain. He’d moved to DC in April, to start working at the DC branch. “Oh, God,” he groans, memories starting to latch into one another to form a hazy, incriminating picture. “Oh, God. It was – I went out with Paige and some other friends to celebrate being made director of HaleEnt DC. I knew I drank too much, but I didn’t think I’d drunk that much.”

“Who is he?” Talia snaps.

“I don’t know,” Derek says, mild panic starting to infiltrate the back of his mind. “I don’t know, I don’t remember. I don’t remember much of anything about that night.”

“Agent Winters?”

Luke shakes his head. “I’m sorry, ma’am. Agent Chen and I were outside the bar, watching the perimeter.”

Derek has a sharp mental flash of using the fire escape to ditch Luke and Chen at the apartment, and of Luke waking him up in the morning with an aspirin and a “Try that again and I’ll put an ankle tracker with a proximity alarm on you every night, sir.” He makes a note to increase his detail’s end-of-year bonus.

“All right,” his mother says, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Well, Derek. What do you want to do?”

He looks over at her, startled. “What?”

“You could take it as a sign,” she says, her eyes softening. “As an opportunity to show the rest of the world who you really are.”

The panic in Derek’s mind amps up a few notches. “No, Mom, the polling data –.”

“The polling data shows that it would be possible for an openly gay man to win the governor’s seat in Louisiana,” she overrides. “You’ve seen the same figures I have.”

Derek considers it for a brief, insane instant. Every moment of his life up until now would be retroactively scrutinized. Every detail of his relationship with Paige made public. Inquiries about his friendship with Daniel, his interactions with the other men in their unit, implying that – no.

“No, Mom,” he says out loud, “It’s not – I don’t want to do that. I’m not ready.”

She snaps back into full presidential. “Fine. We’ll need someone to handle the spin when the pictures leak, and we’ll need a cover story. Deaton, can Maddie -?”

“Not a wise choice, Madam President,” Deaton says quickly. “Ms. Duggan is already beginning to crumble under the pressure of her position. And I believe it’s in the best interest your administration to distance this story from the White House, if possible.”

“We can’t take this to a stranger, Deaton,” Talia says crossly. “It needs to be someone we trust.”

There’s a glint in Deaton’s eye that Derek hates. Deaton’s been a staple fixture in the Hale Family Circus for almost as long as Derek’s been alive – he was a business advisor to Derek’s grandfather before taking over as Talia’s campaign manager during her first run for Senate – and he has a longstanding tendency to spout unfounded wisdom and meddle without being an active participant.

“I believe I know just the young man who can be of service,” Deaton soothes. A small, self-
satisfied smile spreads over his face, and Derek knows he’s in trouble.

Chapter End Notes

All chapters titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.
life was never worse and never better

Chapter Summary

“It’d be treason, Stiles,” Lydia says. “Revealing all the darkest acts of what’s supposed to be a secret branch of the US government. Even if we somehow survived, what you’re talking about is treason. Peter would hold you under the Patriot Act. No one would ever hear from you again, you’d just…disappear.”

Yeah, Stiles thinks, feeling Lydia also drift off as he run long strands of her hair through his fingers. Might be worth it.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING for mentions of intimate partner violence in the past timeline component of this chapter. Proceed with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

August, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

Stiles has become accustomed to weird behavior from his team. They’ve all been through a hell of a lot – individually and as a group – and these days they’re barely holding it together one minute to the next, so they give each other a lot of leeway. Lydia spends a weekend organizing all the books in their little law library by the Dewey Decimal System? Cool. Kira builds herself a rope/hammock fort, so she never has to touch the ground in her and Isaac’s office? Cool, but keep it out of the conference room because that’s a client-facing space. Scott plans no less than seventeen different ways to propose to Allison, one of which legitimately involves horseback riding into the sunset? Whatever makes you happy, bro.

Stiles is also well aware that he’s not exactly a shining example of Healthy Coping Mechanisms. He’s going through Adderall so quickly that Allen threatens to cut him off completely. He saves every weird little note his mother leaves in cookies or cupcakes or peppermint bark and pins it to their Wonderland Wall, then spends hours agonizing over possible hidden meanings. When his insomnia hits new heights in August, he takes to driving circles around the District in the middle of the night in his mother’s Jeep. He makes loops between the apartments of his team, the Hales, Allen, anyone he can think of. Sometimes Starbuck rides shotgun; mostly she sits behind him and hangs her tongue out the window into the night air.

This is how he nearly runs Isaac over.

Not actually almost runs Isaac over, because Isaac has apparently been sleeping pretty well (according to Scott, because Isaac is sleeping at Scott and Allison's these days for reasons no one understands) and is in general far too aware of his surroundings to get run over. But he does step out in front of the Jeep when Stiles is idling at a red light around five in the morning, and it takes
Stiles far longer than it should for him to put together that (A) hey, that’s Isaac and (B) probably means I shouldn’t take my foot off the brake yet.

“Drive straight,” Isaac says, swinging himself in through the passenger window. “There’s something I want to show you.”

Stiles comply. What else is he going to do? He follows Isaac’s turn-by-turn instructions until they’re in a quiet residential neighborhood, parked in front of a standard little two-bedroom house. Most of the lights are off, but there’s a TV on in the living room and the curtains are open just enough that Stiles can make out the back of someone’s head over the top of the couch.

“Who is that? Who are we watching?”

Isaac is silent for a long, long moment before he says, “Camden.”

“Camden.” Stiles rolls the name around in his brain, searching for why it strikes a familiar chord. “Camden…your brother Camden?”

Isaac nods. He produces two small pairs of binoculars from a pocket and offers one set to Stiles, who grabs them and adjusts the focus rapidly, now desperate for a better view. He still can’t see anything other than the back of the man’s head, and it’s entirely indistinctive from any other average-height male with a military-length haircut. “I didn’t think – I mean – you hadn’t mentioned him in a long time.”

“I found him three weeks ago,” Isaac says. His voice is doing the extra-steady, no-inflection thing it does when he’s putting particular effort into keeping himself level. “He’s on leave. I think it’s too quiet for him to sleep upstairs – he goes to bed with his wife, but sneaks out once she falls asleep and goes downstairs so he can sleep with the background noise of the TV. He sets an alarm to make sure he’s awake before anyone else so they won’t find out.”

Stiles slowly drops his binoculars, mulling all of this over. “Isaac, have you…have you been here every night?”

Isaac nods, a hurried little jerk of the head. “I watch Tessa and the kids to make sure they’re safe when he’s away.”

“Okay. Are you going to talk to him? To any of them?”

Another little jerk, this time negative.

“Why not?”

“He thinks I died a long time ago. It’s better than way. Easier.”

Stiles is in absolutely no place to be giving anyone advice about how to interact with family members, but he can’t help the words that pop out of his mouth. “Maybe he doesn’t want easy. Maybe he wants his brother back.”

Isaac doesn’t react at first, save for the subtle tightening of his fingers around the binoculars. Then, carefully, he says, “It’s not safe for them. Not now.”

Stiles normally maintains a low-level hatred for the circumstances they’re in, but it flares up in moments like this. “Not now,” he agrees. “But Isaac, it will be safe for them someday. And when that day comes, you should come back here and talk to him. I’ll come with you if you want, or I’ll sit out here in the car, or at the end of the block – whatever you need. But it’s going to be safe
someday, and you will get to have this.”

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“What if I just go public with everything?” Stiles asks. “I can keep you guys out of it. Say I’ve been doing all the research myself as a side project.”

It’s late. Really late. The three of them are lying in Stiles’ bed, watching the credits of Star Wars: Episode IV roll across the screen and out into the galaxy. It’s been a hell of a week.

“Peter’d clean house,” Scott yawns. He shifts a little, scooting his head off Stiles’ ribs and onto his stomach. “We’d all be dead within the hour. Malia showed me the protocol once – there are already agents assigned to each of us. I thought she was being helpful at the time.”

“He’s the reason my dad’s dead,” Stiles says, talking to his ceiling fan. It spins lazily, doing little to dispel the late-summer DC humidity that gathers on every surface and sticks in your clothes.

“I know, buddy,” Scott says, eyes drooping shut. “I know.”

“It’d be treason, Stiles,” Lydia says. “Revealing all the darkest acts of what’s supposed to be a secret branch of the US government. Even if we somehow survived, what you’re talking about is treason. Peter would hold you under the Patriot Act. No one would ever hear from you again, you’d just…disappear.”

Yeah, Stiles thinks, feeling Lydia also drift off as he run long strands of her hair through his fingers. Might be worth it.

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“Mr. Stilinski.”

Stiles doesn’t even really glance up – the flash of blonde curls in one eye and dark skin in the other tells him all he needs to know. “Erica, Boyd. Now’s not a great time.”

And it’s really not. They’re two days off schedule on the Carver case, and Stiles has no idea how they’re going to make it up. Peter’s been throwing more at them than they can handle recently, and their outcomes are starting to suffer as a result. It’s completely unacceptable. It doesn’t help that Stiles can actually feel the effects of various external factors fucking with his brain chemistry and processing speeds. This sort of stress brings his ADHD roaring back in full force, so he’s either impossibly locked on to one idea or bouncing too rapidly between multiples to be of use. The Adderall he’s taking to counter the ADHD slows him down enough so that he’s helpful if bouncy, but locked on even worse during downswings. The coffee he’s mainlining keeps him awake but jittery, the overall stress level keeps pushing him ankle-deep into little panic attacks, and sleep deprivation is finally starting to catch up with him in the form of overall reflex delay and increased tangential trains of thought.

The fact that he’s cataloged all of these in the time it takes to blow his nose (also of note: increase
in minor nosebleeds, possibly consult Allen if trend continues) means that he’s on an upswing, currently moderately well balanced, and therefore being much more productive than usual. He needs people to leave him alone and let him get his fucking work done.

So why are Boyd and Erica still standing in his office?

“Mr. Stilinski,” Erica says again, and there’s a quality to her voice that breaks through Stiles’ haze. His entire team, pale and subdued, is standing in the hallway behind the Secret Service agents. “You need to come with us. It’s Cora.”

The website being projected onto one of the walls of the Oval Office is streaming a live feed. A live feed of Cora, eight months pregnant, tied to a chair in the middle of what looks like an abandoned warehouse. At the sound of the S&A group entering the room, a face drops in to the corner of the screen and grins at them broadly. Kate.

“Oh, good,” she says. “The gang’s all here.”

Stiles sees red.

He gives himself five seconds to be angry. To be angry, helpless, infuriated, exhausted, close to tears. He ticks away the seconds in his head, using Scott’s steady breathing at his shoulder as a metronome, then forces the rest of the world to drop away so he can focus. Maybe it’s how often he’s had to do this lately – shut down all the parts of him that are Stiles Stilinski of Stilinski & Associates – but it's practically easy.

“Kira,” he says, accepting the little pad of paper and pen that Lydia presses into his palm, “Can you trace the –.”

“Already on it,” Kira responds, voice half a world away. When Stiles glances over, she’s cross-legged on the floor, one knee brushing the presidential seal emblazoned on the carpet, laptop open and fingers dancing over the keys.

“You won’t find us,” Kate sing-songs. “I’m bouncing this signal off so many towers and satellites that we might as well be in Minsk. Learned from the best, didn’t I, Isaac? Scott?”

“Boyd, get Kira through any firewalls she runs into,” Stiles says. For the first time, he takes stock of who’s in the room – it’s just the S&A team, the president, and Erica and Boyd carefully keeping themselves off to the side of the room, out of frame. That’s good. Small is good. He walks quickly to the president’s desk and shows her the pad of paper, on which he’s hastily scribbled Can we mute our side?

Talia shakes her head.

“We're going to keep this short,” Kate says loudly, stepping closer to the camera until her face takes up almost the entire shot. “Madam President. You're going to pull the US troops out of Bahrain. Stiles. You're going to get your dear sweet mother to come back to town and turn herself in. Both of these things are going to be done by 4PM on Friday, or darling Cora and her unborn child here are going to pay the price.”

“The United States does not negotiate –,” Talia starts.

“Shut up, Talia,” Kate snaps. “Let the smart one speak.”
Stiles’ brain backflips through calculations in the background even as he talks – he needs to keep the feed open, give Kira a fighting chance to trace it to its origin. “You’ve got your freedom, Kate. Why do you need my mother to come back? And why are you interested in Bahrain? Or is a better question ‘Why is your father interested in Bahrain?’”

Something between fury and disgust crosses Kate’s face. “My father has nothing to do with this.”

Friday at 4PM – it’s now Tuesday, 2PM. That gives them seventy-four hours. Stiles forces his voice to stay calm as he says, “Then who’s calling the shots? I know you, Kate, and you’re not smart enough or stupid enough to try to pull this off by yourself.”

Kate sneers in response, but Stiles’ brain is already five But-why’s into the possibilities and settling inextricably on the one that makes the most sense. The only one that makes sense, in truth.

“Someone who wants my mother under control and to destabilize the Crescent Conflict,” Stiles says, looking across the room. “Lyds, who does that sound like to you?”

“Now that you mention it,” Lydia says slowly, walking towards him and keeping steady eye contact to make sure they’ve reached the same conclusion, “I do seem to remember the Acting President telling us who’d advised him in favor of preemptive strikes against both sides of the Crescent Conflict back in March.”

Talia is tapping a fingernail rapidly on the Resolute desk, clearly displeased with being out of the loop. Stiles ignores her in favor of turning back to the projection and locating the little blinking light of the wall-mounted webcam.

“Tell me you didn’t, Kate,” he says. “Tell me you didn’t get in bed with B6-13.”

There’s a pause in Talia’s tapping. So she recognizes the name, at least. Interesting.

Kate smiles beatifically and then shifts out of view. The camera shakes, steadies, then swings in a wide arc. “You tell me, Stiles,” her voice says, panning over what must be a dozen dark-clothed, half-shadowed figures. Stiles thinks he recognizes Deucalion’s elegant stance, maybe Malia’s jutted hip. The shot makes a full circle and settles back on Cora. “I have to say, they make great arson instructors. How’s that house of yours, back in Beacon Hills?”

Stiles has to work hard to keep his jaw from dropping open, the way Scott's does. He focuses on hopping up to sit on Talia’s desk and being condescending as he asks, "Kind of petty, don’t you think? A little childish? Was it supposed to be punishment for South America?"

"Just a friendly reminder that everything you love is easily accessible," Kate says, still off-screen. "4PM on Friday. I'm assuming I don't need to tell you not to go to the FBI or the Secret Service or any other authorities you might be thinking of calling in. You’ll be hearing from me soon."

The feed cuts out, leaving a frozen image of Cora, glowering impressively. Kira swears under her breath, but her fingers keep moving. Boyd points at something on her screen and speaks a long alphanumeric password in quiet, clear syllables.

Stiles’ hands are shaking, but that’s it. This is the same as the shooting – if Stiles panics, someone is going to die. Cora is going to die. No, no – the client’s daughter. If Stiles panics, the client’s daughter will die.

Stilinski & Associates has a perfect, 6 out of 6 safe return rate for abduction victims.

Seven is Stiles’ lucky number.
“Madam President,” he says, cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders. “You need to invoke the 25th Amendment.”

“I – what?”

“The 25th Amendment. I assume you re-drafted your letter when you recovered from the poisoning? Go submit it to the President pro tempore and the House Speaker. Talk to me when the stability of the Middle East is no longer dependent on the safety of that woman and her child,” Stiles says, pointing at the screen.

Talia is glaring at him – apparently, his brashness shocked her out of the frightened mother mindset. “And if I refuse?”

Stiles pauses. “Then you stay out of it entirely.”

Talia draws herself up to her full height. “I am the President of the United –.”

“Exactly,” Stiles says. “You’re the President of the United States. That’s the problem. You’ve told me yourself, in this very office, that you’re the president first and everything else second. And that’s the way it’s supposed to be, but it means that so long as you’re the president, you can’t value Cora’s life above the position of troops in Bahrain, and that’s going to get Cora killed. But if you jeopardize the tentative resolution of the Crescent Conflict to save your daughter’s life, you do not deserve to hold this office. So either hand the presidency to McKinney for the next three days and help as Cora’s mother, or hold the presidency and trust me and my team to handle this ourselves with no interference.”

“Mr. Stilinski –.”

“I’m not asking,” Stiles says loudly, starting to walk toward the door. His team follows, Kira balancing her laptop on one arm and typing with her free hand as Boyd continues to speak into her ear. “I’m done asking. I have been lying to almost everyone about almost everything for the past year and a half, and I am done doing as I am told by members of your family. We’re going to start planning in –,” he checks his watch, “four hours. We’ll wait for you to submit your letter for exactly that long. At six o’clock I’m going after Cora myself, and you can deal with the fallout on your own.”

March, Year Two of Talia Hale’s First Term (3.42 years ago)

“You shouldn’t have come,” Lydia tries to say when she opens the door to her apartment, but Stiles sees the hint of panic in her eyes and the angry, shockingly purple bruise on her cheekbone and immediately loses every bit of level-headedness four hours flirting with a cute neurosurgeon on the train might have given him.

“Lyds,” he says softly, still standing in the hallway with his bag over one shoulder. “What happened?”

“You shouldn’t have come,” Lydia repeats. “It’s fine. I’m fine. I can handle it. Nothing’s wrong.”
Stiles can feel pity trying to soften his eyes, but shuts that down. Lydia Martin doesn’t need pity, Lydia Martin despises pity. He moves past her into the apartment gently, trying not to react when she flinches ever-so-slightly at the brush of his hand on her waist. “Okay, my mistake. At any rate, it’s amazing to see you and I met a hot doctor on the train, so this weekend isn’t a total waste. Want to grab a late lunch? I haven’t been to the city in months.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Lydia says from behind him, sounding both relieved and confused. “Just let me shower and get dressed. And Stiles,” she adds, prompting Stiles to turn from inspecting the view out her window and look at her, “It’s really good to see you.”

He drinks her in. Even in yoga pants and a t-shirt three sizes too big for her, even with her hair in one of those messy bun things that girls magically hold in place with a pen, even in no makeup with bags under her eyes and that bruise screaming for attention against her pale skin, she’s still one of the most beautiful women Stiles has ever seen. He’s grateful, in a way, that he didn’t meet her until law school – something tells him that he would have had one of those epically massive, heartbreaking crushes if he’d known her in high school. At least this way, he could legally drown his sorrows in alcohol when she rejected his affections during L3.

He blinks himself out of the momentary stroll down memory lane when he realizes he’s still staring at her. “Yeah. It’s good to see you too, Lyds.”

The second she disappears through the door of her bedroom, Stiles drops his bag and pulls out his phone.

Me (1:42PM) Dude, something’s up with Lydia.

Stiles wanders the apartment while he waits for a response. He’s only been here once – Lydia’s birthday last year – and it’s just how he remembers it. Small but tidy, a tiny bit opulent. He feels remarkably out of place in worn khakis and a button-down, the standard not-in-the-office outfit he’d started wearing when he realized that the residents of Washington, DC didn’t appreciate running into their White House Press Secretary in jeans and layered Captain America t-shirts and flannel.

Not that he’s the White House Press Secretary anymore. That’s going to take some getting used to. Maybe he’ll spend an entire month in sweatpants while he figures out what he wants to do with his life. He’s only twenty-four, after all.

Scott McCall (1:43PM) What do you mean?

Me (1:43PM) I got a call from her last night asking me to come to New York. She tried to take it back but I came up anyway, and she’s got this nasty bruise on her face and is weirdly skittish.

Me (1:43PM) Oh also I quit my job and met a hot doctor and have a date next week.

<Incoming call from Scott McCall>
“Hey, buddy,” Stiles says when the call connects. In the next room, the water in Lydia’s bathroom starts running. “How’s it hanging?”

“You quit your job, you got a date, and someone hurt Lydia,” Scott says, voice a little strained. “Which of those do you want to start with?”

“Where are you? I don’t hear any tumbleweeds or duels at high noon taking place.”

“I own a cattle ranch in 21st century Texas, Stiles,” Scott sighs. “My life is not an old Western, no matter how much you want it to be. You’ve been here. And I’m at my lawyer’s office looking at deed transfers from a ranch that’s shutting down.”

“Why do you need a lawyer? You are a lawyer.”

“You know perfectly well that I’m not admitted to the bar in – stop deflecting. What’s going on with Lydia?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Stiles says slowly, perusing Lydia’s Blu-ray collection. “You know Lydia – she’s not going to want to talk about anything that she thinks makes her look weak.”

“But she called and asked you to come,” Scott reasons. “You can’t just leave.”

“I didn’t say I was going to leave,” Stiles retorts, a bit irritated. “Just that I’m not sure how to get her to talk to me. I don’t know how to handle Lydia.”

“D’you think it’s serious? Should I get on a plane?”

There’s an old copy of *Wuthering Heights* on Lydia’s coffee table. Stiles turns it over in his hands, breathing in the scent of the binding breaking down while he considers Scott’s question. “I think it’s bad, Scottie. I don’t know why, but I’ve had this knot in my stomach ever since I got Lydia’s first message, and it’s not going away.”

Scott is quiet on the other end of the line for a minute, then says, “Didn’t your dad always tell you to go with your gut?”

Stiles winces hard. “Yeah. Yeah, he did.”

"Okay then,” Scott says decisively. “I’ll need to make sure Rafael can handle the ranch for a few days, but I’ll book the first ticket I can.”

The knot in Stiles’ stomach loosens ever so slightly. “Rafael, huh? Still not ‘Dad?’”

“He’s my father, he’s not my dad,” Scott says sharply. “I’ve got to get back in this meeting. I’ll text you when I’ve got flight info. Keep me posted if you find anything out, okay?”


"With you ‘til the end of the line, pal. Hey, maybe you should try talking to that guy she’s been dating from her law firm, the one who’s technically her boss. If he’s not, you know, the one who did it, he might know who did.”

The knot in Stiles’ stomach turns cold and dangerous. “Yeah, I’ll look into him.”

The call disconnects, and Stiles tries to get a handle on what he’s feeling. He hadn’t had enough time to form a hypothesis about how Lydia got the bruise, but Scott’s words are stirring up
something vindictive and angry. Stiles grew up seeing his dad and the deputies counsel abuse
victims, battered women – the thought that someone might be doing that to Lydia makes his skin
crawl. If he finds out that someone is consciously, repeatedly hurting her…on instinct, he opens a
new text conversation, one he hasn’t used in a year and a half.

**Me (1:55PM)** How soon could you be in NYC if I needed you?

The water in Lydia’s bathroom shuts off. Stiles drops onto the couch and flicks the TV on, settling
on the Food Network and focusing on taking calming breaths while someone on screen talks about
the different types of chard. At the top of the hour, the discussion turns to bok choy. When his
phone beeps, it’s not a response to his message.

**Laura Hale (2:07PM)** You QUIT? Stiles, I know the CC thing wasn’t great, but you can’t just quit.
Mom’s furious – can you call me?

**Me (2:09PM)** Everything you need to know is in my letter of resignation. I’m sorry if I put you in a
tough place, Laura, but I can’t work for this administration anymore.

**Laura Hale (2:09PM)** You’re an asshole. Maddie’s not ready for this.

**Me (2:09PM)** Maddie will be fine.

**Laura Hale (2:12PM)** You’ve always been too principled to be in politics.

**Me (2:12PM)** My mom told me that once.

**Laura Hale (2:13PM)** Your mother was a smart woman. Look, can you just…will you get coffee
with me tomorrow? I promise I won’t try to convince you to come back. I’m not that dumb.

**Me (2:14PM)** I’m in New York for a few days. I’ll call you when I get back?

Stiles drops his phone on the coffee table and kicks his feet up next to it. The on-screen personality
is talking about barbequing bok choy. He watches, disconnected, until Lydia emerges from her
bedroom looking New York City chic.

“Take your filthy shoes off my coffee table immediately,” she says imperiously, pulling a pair of
oversized sunglasses out of her purse. “What are you hungry for?”

“Anything but bok choy,” Stiles responds, flipping the TV off. When he sweeps up his phone, he
has four waiting texts.

**Laura Hale (2:17PM)** Sounds good. Also, Peter says he’ll miss you. He’s getting weirder in his old
age.

**Scott McCall (2:24PM)** Delta 2274. I get in at 7:53 tonight. Text me Lydia’s address? I don’t have
Stiles picks at a cuticle as he follows Lydia out into the hallway to the elevator. Calling Isaac in seems...extreme. And risky. When he didn’t hear from Isaac within a few months of Election Day, he’d kind of written him off. The year deadline Isaac initially gave himself is long past, and the fact that Stiles is considering voluntarily exposing Lydia and Scott, the two most important people in his world, to a mentally unstable man who is uncomfortably proficient with knives, corrosive agents, and disposing of corporeal evidence isn’t lost on him.

But he watches Lydia don the sunglasses that cover half her bruise before they even step outdoors, and he makes a decision.

“Stiles,” Lydia calls from the doorway. “Your...friend is here.”

Stiles checks to make sure the pot won’t boil over and dashes to the door. Sure enough, Isaac is standing in front of Lydia – but this is hardly the Isaac Stiles remembers from Election Day. If anything, this Isaac is worse than the Isaac Stiles had first encountered in Chicago. He’s thin to the point of being gaunt, his close-cropped hair only accentuating the taut pull of skin over cheekbones, and his eyes are sunken and haunted. He looks at Stiles with the barest flicker of recognition.


When Isaac doesn’t respond, Stiles gently takes Lydia’s elbow – again ignoring her subtle flinch, but not missing how Isaac’s eyes lock on the nearly imperceptible movement – and moves her out of the doorway. Isaac follows silently, leaving a battered black duffel bag just inside and removing his shoes.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” Lydia hisses into Stiles’ ear, watching Isaac start a careful, meticulous circuit of the walls of her apartment. “You still haven’t told me who he is or what he’s doing here. He looks like a serial killer.”

Stiles bites his tongue against the admission that well, yeah, that’s kind of exactly who Isaac is. “We can trust him. We might need him if things get ugly.”

Lydia looks at Stiles quizzically. “What things?”

Stiles, still holding Lydia’s arm, uses it to pull her back to the kitchen. “There’s a reason you called me here, Lyds. I’m not going to push you, but I’m not going to let you keep pretending
everything’s fine when it’s obviously not.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Lydia sniffs, reclaiming her wine glass and perching on a bar stool to watch Stiles continue tending to dinner. “I overreacted when I called you. I can handle it.”

“Is that why you’ve flinched every time I’ve touched you?” Stiles asks, trying to make his voice as gentle as he can to offset the harshness of the question.

“I’m just not used to casual contact. New Yorkers are big into personal space.”

Stiles washes a head of broccoli, trying to imagine how his dad would have this conversation. Calmly, patiently, subtly. There would be lots of cups of tea. Everyone would cry and eventually it would all be okay.

Instead, he’s got Lydia on her third glass of wine, Isaac doing what he thinks is a bug sweep, Scott in a taxi on the way here, and himself. And the only tact Stiles has ever had has been developed through the realization that pissing off diplomats does not a fruitful relationship make.

He also has the truncated results of a hasty background check on his phone, courtesy of the Beacon Hills Sheriff Department. It’s this that he pulls up now, and he slides the device across the counter to Lydia before he goes back to beheading broccoli.

He can feel the chill in the air when Lydia, disbelieving, says, “You ran a background check on Nathaniel?”

“Your boyfriend had three previous domestic disturbance reports and a restraining order filed against him before you met,” Stiles says. “I’m still looking into it, but he had a fiancé three years ago who showed up in the hospital with injuries consistent with being thrown down a flight of stairs.”

“Stiles, it’s not –.”

“How’d you get the bruise, Lyds?” Stiles sets down the vegetables and the knife and turns to her.

“I told you, I fell when I was doing a handstand at yoga,” Lydia insists.

“Lydia, I’m not – oh, hi, Isaac.”

Isaac appears noiselessly in the kitchen door and hands Stiles a small sheet of paper, torn from a notepad. Stiles squints at the narrow lettering. “Isaac says the only way to get a bruise like that is from high-velocity impact with a hard object. Falling from a handstand wouldn’t do it.”

Lydia snorts. “And you’re going to take the silent wonder’s word over mine?”

Isaac hands over another piece of paper. “Isaac wants to know if you got the bruised ribs and sprained wrist from yoga, too.” Stiles looks up at her. “Oh, Lyds.”

Lydia looks startled, then furious. “How did he – never mind. Neither of you know what you’re talking about. It was an accident.”

Stiles smiles at her sadly. “You were first in your class at Harvard Law. You’re too smart to believe that.”

“I can handle it.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second,” Stiles says, removing the boiling pot of potatoes from heat and
dumping them out into a sieve. Idly, he notices Isaac melting back out of the room. “But you don’t have to do it on your own.”

Lydia laughs, a touch hysterically. “No, I just have to leave weepy voicemails for my best friend to find and panic over.”

“Who’s panicking?” Stiles says. “I’m not. I’m ready to let Isaac disembowel your soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, but I’m not panicking.”

“Honey, I’m home!” Scott calls, waltzing into the kitchen with an arm flung around Isaac’s neck. Isaac, clearly bewildered, is looking at Scott like the sun shines out his ass. “This guy let me in. Who is he? What’s going on? Is that dinner? I’m starving.”

Chapter End Notes

I enjoy writing the S&A team backstories far, far too much.

All chapter titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.
Chapter Summary

Derek, whom he hasn’t seen or spoken to since April. The last time they were in the same room, Derek accused him of, at the very least, being in league with B6-13. This is, apparently, going to be a replay of that conversation, because Derek opens with, “If I find out that you’re behind this somehow, I swear to God I’m going to rip your throat out. With my teeth.”

Stiles doesn’t slam the door in his face. But it’s a close thing.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING for mentions of intimate partner violence in the past timeline portion of this chapter. Proceed with caution.

The next several chapters will feature multiple POV switches in the present timeline. Everything’s chronological and I think it reads pretty clearly, but keep your wits about you.

August, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

It takes Lydia, Scott, and Isaac the full four hour window Stiles gave the president to break down the Wonderland Wall at Lydia’s, transport it, and reassemble it in Stiles’ living room. Kira spends those four hours doing some form of hacking that Stiles doesn't understand; Stiles spends them baking and dropping Tupperwares of lemon squares, oatmeal raisin cookies, and grasshopper pie – his mother’s favorites – at various points throughout the District, all with some version of Please, please help scrawled on the lid. He even gets Allison to make him a gingerbread house (which she delivers, confused but happy to help, with a kiss on the cheek and a “Take care of yourself, Stiles”) and leaves it under the park bench where he’d first talked to Claudia back in January.

The eight months between January and now feel like five years.

At 6:01PM, Stiles turns to his team and is getting ready to say something dramatic about time being up, they’re on their own, it’s them against the universe, when there’s a knock on his door.

“Hold that thought,” he says, heading for the door and nudging Starbuck out of the way with his shin when she leaps excitedly around his legs. Because certain self-preservation instincts have never quite stuck with him, he swings the door open without looking through the peephole, and is floored to find Derek staring at him. “Derek.”
“And Derek’s much more attractive friends, Erica and Boyd,” Erica announces, sweeping past all three of the men standing still in the doorway. “Scott, Lydia, anime princess, depressed marionette. What’ve you got to eat? I’m starving.”

It always takes Stiles half a second to adjust to off-duty Erica. He suspects it’ll take his team significantly longer.

“What’s going on?” He asks quietly, directing the question at Boyd and pretending he can’t feel Derek’s eyes searing a hole into his temple.

“Agent Reyes and I are on indefinite leave,” Boyd replies calmly. He hands Stiles a folded piece of paper, closed by the presidential seal. “Our Commander-in-Chief has loaned our services to Stilinski & Associates for the foreseeable future.”

Stiles breaks the seal, of course giving himself a paper cut, and reads the short memo on From the desk of President Talia Hale letterhead. Apparently, you can loan out Secret Service agents to private entities. Or maybe there’s just not a specific law forbidding it yet. Who knew?

“Where are Luke and Chen?” Stiles stuffs his bleeding index finger in his mouth and reads the memo again. Really, it tells him everything he needs to know: Talia’s staying in office, Erica and Boyd are under his command for the time being, and Derek is, somehow, supposed to be helpful. But the second he stops reading this letter, he’s going to have to make eye contact with Derek, and he’d like to avoid that for as long as possible.

“Agents Winters and Chen have been transferred to the president’s detail in our absence,” Boyd says. He places a massive hand on Stiles’ shoulder, shifts him to the left, and moves into the apartment, leaving Stiles standing alone with Derek.

Derek, whom he hasn’t seen or spoken to since April. The last time they were in the same room, Derek accused him of, at the very least, being in league with B6-13.

This is, apparently, going to be a replay of that conversation, because Derek opens with, “If I find out that you’re behind this somehow, I swear to God I’m going to rip your throat out. With my teeth.”

Stiles doesn’t slam the door in his face. But it’s a close thing.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says, aiming for calm and coming out Danger, Will Robinson. Good enough.

“I know you’re the ones who helped Kate not get caught for so long,” Derek spits. Behind him, Stiles is somewhat aware of Erica starting a small fire in his kitchen. “I know that my uncle, the foreign affairs policy advisor, has been in your office. I know that Argent Arms is being tied to both sides of the Crescent Conflict.”

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Stiles blinks at him multiple times, like his brain is stalling out. “Wait, what? Argent Arms is – what?”

Stiles wraps his long fingers around Derek’s elbow and tugs him bodily into the apartment, letting
the door swing shut on its own. Derek is so taken aback by the sudden shift in mood that he doesn’t think to twist free of Stiles’ grasp until they’re in the living room, where an entire wall that used to showcase Stiles’ Star Wars posters has been taken over by multi-colored Post-it notes.

“Okay,” Stiles says, releasing Derek in favor of pacing frantically in front of the wall. “Scott, can you make sure Erica doesn’t burn down my apartment? Isaac, you’re completely, 100 zillion percent certain that you disabled all the bugs in here, right?”

Isaac, all his weight balanced on the ball of one foot and watching every shift in Boyd’s limbs, nods.

“Great. Okay, Kira, any progress on the –.”

“Leave me alone, Stiles, I lose track of the secondary code every time you talk to me –.”

“Okay, I – sorry – okay.” Stiles stops pacing and scrubs his hands across his face. No matter what else Derek feels toward Stiles at this moment – distrust, uncertainty, anger – there’s concern there, too, because Derek has never seen Stiles like this, this upset, this out of control. He’s not even this bad when he’s actively having a panic attack, and it’s painful to see him this out of sorts. Derek distracts himself by taking a step closer to the wall to bring the writing on the Post-its into focus. It’s mostly the curved, might-as-well-be-text-it’s-so-consistent writing he recognizes as Lydia’s, but Stiles’ haphazard scrawl and Scott’s blocky all-caps make cameos. He understands immediately that it’s supposed to be a timeline of events, stretching decades into the past – all the Post-its at that end are green (Historical, according to the helpful legend posted in the lower-left corner of the chaos). The more recent years are a mess of pink (Claudia), yellow (Undetermined), and…

Blue. Peter.

“Someone start talking,” Derek says, his voice barely more than a growl.

“Secret government organization of spies and assassins,” Scott offers, returning from the kitchen leading a chastised-looking Erica, who’s now holding a bowl of pretzels in one hand and a beer in the other. She passes the beer to Boyd and settles between his legs on the floor.

“B6-13, AKA Wonderland,” Lydia adds. “As far as we can tell, they’ve been active for almost fifty years. They’re the ones who took Cora.”

Stiles pulls a row of white Post-its off the wall and hands them to Derek absently. He keeps staring at a string of the blue and yellow squares while Derek reads aloud, “‘Funded through backchannels, staffed by elite personnel hand-selected from other government agencies and outside entities, charged with doing whatever it takes to ensure the stability and supremacy of the United States of America, even if this means operating outside the confines of the legal, judicial, and moral systems that it strives to protect.’ This is insane. You’re all – you’re all insane.”

“It’s all true,” Erica says around a mouthful of pretzel, eliciting surprised looks from everyone on the S&A team except Stiles. “What? I’m the second-highest ranking Secret Service agent on the president’s detail. It’s my job to know the hush-hush stuff. Sorry, babe,” she adds as an afterthought, patting Boyd’s shoulder.

Boyd just shrugs, completely unbothered. “Protocol’s protocol.”

Erica tilts her head at the legend. “Does this mean Peter Hale’s Command? And Claudia – Claudia Stilinski? Claire Collins? Huh. Guess that makes sense.”
If Stiles were paying attention to the conversation going on behind him with more than 4% of his brain, he’d probably find the way Derek turns red and explodes, “It does not makes sense!” entertaining. As it is, he barely notices the outburst, too caught up in cataloging the new information and the lines of probability and causality it allows him to draw between previously unconnected points.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay, okay, okay.”

“Peter’s behind Cora’s kidnapping, then?” Erica asks, ignoring Derek’s growing frustration. “That’s our best guess,” Scott says. Derek, though the haze of anger that clouds his vision every time someone mentions Cora’s current predicament and the confusion and incredulity regarding literally everything that’s happened in the past minute, notices Scott, Lydia, and Isaac all watching the lines of Stiles’ shoulders and neck closely.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Derek tries again. “Why would Peter be in charge of secret spies?” “He’d want co-Command killed,” Erica says, nodding, still ignoring Derek entirely. “Yeah, I can see that. That’s what I’d want if I were him.”

“Kate’s first condition is the one that’s throwing us,” Scott says. “What’s the point of pulling our troops out of Bahrain?”

“Argent Arms is supplying both sides,” Stiles says, half to himself.

“Oh, so now you’re going to be helpful?” Derek jeers, unable to corral the rage in his voice or stop himself from taking an aggressive step forward.

Stiles finally looks away from the wall, eyes flashing a warning, but doesn’t have time to say more than, “Of course I’m –!” before Isaac’s between them, and Scott’s between them, and Starbuck is barking, and a hand grabs the collar of Derek’s shirt and forces him to stumble a few steps out of the way. He careens into Boyd’s chest – and Boyd, seriously, how did Boyd of all people move that fast – and then Stiles is shoving his way past everyone right up into Derek’s face.

“You know what?” Stiles says, and this close Derek can see the bags under his eyes and the weird, not-right color of his skin. “Fuck you. You don’t get to do that. I’ve always protected your family. I’ve always – you should know better than anyone what I’ve done to keep your family out of the sometimes very fucking literal line of fire, so you don’t get to stand there and look surprised or like it’s new for me to do this. Fuck you.”

"Stiles, what did you say about Argent Arms?" Lydia calls into the incredibly charged silence that follows. Stiles seems to suddenly notice Boyd’s broad hand spread across his chest, holding him back, and he pushes away from it, tripping into Isaac’s shoulder on his way back to the wall.
“They’re linked to both sides of the Crescent Conflict,” Stiles says, making it to Lydia’s side. He snags a yellow Post-it, scribbles Argent Arms + Crescent Alliance and Eastern Coalition, and sticks it on the wall next to the blue Pushed for aggression against both sides of Cresc. Conf. He can still feel tension bleeding into the room behind him, and wonders idly if Isaac is bodily threatening Derek with any of his household objects yet. Probably not – Boyd or Erica would probably be making more noise if that were the case.

“Stiles,” Lydia says slowly, winding her hair up into a bun on the top of her head the way she only does when she needs to think exceptionally clearly. “What if – bear with me – what if Peter and Gerard know each other?”


“Stiles,” Lydia snaps, breaking his loop. “What do you need us to do?”

Stiles takes a breath, then another. He needs to know how this plays out, and he can’t hold that many sets of motives in his head at once. “Okay. Lydia, be Peter. Scott, you’re Gerard. Kira – .”

“Leave me alone, Stiles!” Kira practically shouts, finally removing herself from the room and retreating into Stiles’ bedroom with her laptop.

“Isaac,” Stiles tries again, but when he looks up, Isaac is not-so-casually flipping a boning knife around the fingers of his right hand. Okay, so, no Isaac. “Okay, so here’s what we know. Peter Hale,” he says, pointing to Lydia, “has been pushing for the US to get involved in the Crescent Conflict since – shit, since Talia’s first presidential election.”

“And tried to get McKinney to order preemptive strikes against both sides before the US took Bahrain, back in April,” Lydia adds.


“Ooh, pick me!” Erica says, bouncing off the couch and raising her hand. “I can be the senator.”

“Okay, fine, whatever. Chris Argent supported the exact same plan, even when Peter’s counsel was supposedly private.”

“And all his buddies on the International Ops subcommittee are shady as fuck,” Erica contributes gleefully. “Sorry. Not helpful?”

“We haven’t been able to put Peter and Chris in the same room,” Stiles says, grabbing Post-it’s off the wall and laying them at the feet of the relevant role-player. “But if Peter and Gerard are on the same team…” He hands Scott the yellow Argent Arms + Crescent Alliance and Eastern Coalition sticky.

“If Gerard’s dealing to both sides, it’s about money,” Scott says. “He knows exactly what the other guys have, so he can leverage that knowledge and keep upping the ante.”

“Chris would push for aggression because the more weapons we destroy in air strikes, the more new ones have to be bought,” Erica offers. “Was that better? More helpful?”
“What does Peter get out of it, though?” Lydia wonders. “Gerard needs Peter because Peter’s the one with contacts overseas, since he’s the foreign policy advisor. But even if he and Gerard are friends, what does Peter get out of starting a foreign war?”

“My mother thought crippling both sides would prevent a nuclear holocaust,” Stiles says, pulling the corresponding pink Post-it off the wall and letting it hang from his index finger. “But the WMD’s aren’t in play anymore, the region’s stable –.”

“It’s not,” Derek interrupts, and every head in the room snaps to him.

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Everyone’s attention zooms in on him, and Derek can practically feel the force of it hit him like an air gun.

“What?” Stiles barks, and Derek considers redacting. But either everyone in this room has gone the same shade of insane (probability: slim to none), this is an elaborate practical joke designed to make him go insane (probability: slightly higher, still unlikely), or there’s just a hell of a lot going on that he’s in the dark about, and it’s best to take his cues from those who can see the bigger picture. Help if you can, otherwise sit down, shut up, and trust your team.

Weirdly, this is something the Air Force actually sort of trained him for.

“The region’s not stable,” he says. “Daniel was over there with the first wave of troops to occupy Bahrain, and he told me that they’re basically one misstep from war. Not nuclear war, but still, war. If my mom pulls the US troops out, that might be all it takes.”

“So what does Peter, as Command of B6-13,” Lydia says, gesturing at the white Post-its holding B6-13’s mission statement that Derek still has clutched in one hand, “get out of normal, non-nuclear war?”

Derek and Stiles make eye contact, and Derek can see the conclusion forming in Stiles’ eyes even as his mind makes the same jump.

“Power,” they say together.

“He gets to know that he caused a war,” Derek continues. “A war that my mom, the president, didn’t want to happen.”

“Argent Arms will still rake in millions,” Stiles adds, nodding and starting to scribble on Post-its again. “Peter will have the leading supplier of weapons for the biggest armed conflict in the world owing him a huge favor. He’ll be able to –.” Stiles freezes, looking at what he’s just written.

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“He’ll be able to what, dude?” Scott prompts, tugging the little blue square out of his hand and reading, “‘Peter decides who wins the war.’”
Lydia tries to contain her gasp with a hand over her mouth. “That’s…millions of lives. He wouldn’t.”

“He would,” Derek says, dropping heavily into the armchair. “He absolutely would.”

Stiles’ brain is finally, blissfully, thankfully, slowing down.

“It’d be easy.” Erica says. “Send a shipment of rifles without firing pins. Grenades with faulty timers. Let the other guys know about the weaknesses. It’d be easy.”

Her words sink heavily into the silence.

“I got it!” Kira crows, bursting out of the bedroom and flipping her laptop screen so it displays out. The screen is mostly black and cycling through infinite lines of unintelligible code that Stiles guesses only Isaac can understand. “It was simple once I cloned the fake Mac address she was using to host the –.”

“Layman’s terms, Kira, for the love of God,” Stiles says, pinching the bridge of his nose. Now that the adrenaline’s wearing off, his headache is coming back in full force.

Kira just beams at him. “The next time Kate opens the feed, I’ll be able to track the signal.”

March, Year Two of Talia Hale’s First Term (3.42 years ago)

It’s surprisingly easy.

Scott, Lydia, and Stiles fall back into each other’s patterns without conscious effort. The three of them only spent two weeks together during the last semester of L3 for the Harvard vs. Stanford Mock Trial, but Stiles feels the rightness of working with them in his bones. Isaac, for his part, largely stays silent, save a whispered conversation with Lydia that leaves her wiping tears away and fiercely declaring, “We’re keeping him. Forever.”

And having Scott around again, well – Stiles feels like he’s standing on solid ground for the first time in months.

Nathaniel Richards, a junior partner at Richards, MacGregor, & Smythe and son of co-founder and senior partner Dorian Richards, doesn’t even really present that much of a challenge. Lydia’s been hearing rumors of his unethical behavior around the proverbial water cooler for almost as long as she’s been at the firm and placed under Nathaniel’s command, and once Isaac uses her access to the company’s systems to get into Nathaniel’s case files, the pieces line themselves up to be knocked down. Scott charms a few judges, Stiles goes to the New York Bar Administration, and Lydia asks Nathaniel to an early lunch on Tuesday.

“You’re being disbarred,” Lydia repeats calmly. Stiles almost wishes he’d picked a different seat in the café so he could see Nathaniel’s face, but watching Lydia’s as she methodically destroys him is pretty damn satisfying.

“You’re bluffing,” Nathaniel says. “You don’t have proof.”
“I talked to the Warners, who said they told you about the Lancaster property three weeks before
the settlement discussions. Henry Liu has, on record, your attempt to bribe him into dropping the
plea deal. Here I have Judges Moore and Ostanoff’s signed affidavits that you intentionally
mishandled cases in their courtrooms. Go ahead, rip them up. The originals are already with the
NYBA. You’re being disbarred and blacklisted.”

“You’ll pay for this,” Nathaniel hisses.

Lydia smiles, a stone-cold expression without a hint of humor. Stiles has only seen her look at
someone this way once before – when she went in for the kill during Mock Trial. “This is just what
I know about your professional life, Nathaniel. Do you want to talk about what I could do to you if
the details of your personal life come to light? Or what I could do to the firm if details of your
father’s professional life are exposed?”

“This is blackmail.”

“Yes,” Lydia says flatly. “You’re going to live a quiet, pathetic, lonely life. An acquaintance of
mine will check in on you every so often to make sure you’re behaving yourself. If you so much as
touch another woman, I will hand my medical records, along with those of your former fiancé, to a
judge and I will personally prosecute you in a very public, very drawn-out trial that ends with you
in jail for fifteen to twenty. You’ve seen me in court, Nathaniel. Make an intelligent decision.”

Isaac, bizarrely, is asleep. Full-on, passed-out asleep, with his head tilted back over the arm of
Lydia’s couch and his mouth open. Well, maybe it’s not that bizarre, actually – since Isaac arrived
Saturday night, this is the first time Stiles has seen him sleep at all, and now it’s after dark on
Tuesday.

“He trusts you,” Lydia observes quietly, delicately chopstick-ing another piece of moo shu pork
into her mouth. “The both of you. He’s calmer when you’re around.”

“Hey, it’s your apartment,” Stiles says. The three of them had been sitting on the carpet around
Lydia’s coffee table, a marathon of CSI: Miami playing in the background, for well over an hour
before they noticed Isaac’s condition. “If he’s comfortable enough to sleep here, he must trust you,
too.”

“He’s a good guy,” Scott says, looking at Isaac with care. “Where did you say he comes from?”

“I didn’t,” Stiles responds. “It’s not really my story to tell.”

Scott shrugs. “Just curious. Anyway, Lyds, what are you going to do now? Go back to work?”

Lydia makes a face and starts boxing up the remnants of their dinner. “Dorian Richards’
professional exploits are just as below-board as his son’s, and by now he knows that I know that.
I’ll probably resign so he doesn’t get the satisfaction of firing me.”

“And then what?” Stiles mutes the TV so the show’s theme song doesn’t wake Isaac.

“Well, I was thinking,” Lydia says slowly. “Scott, you’re moving to DC soon, right?”

Scott nods. “Just as soon as everything’s squared away with Rafael and the land we’re taking over
from the Todero Ranch. Legal Aid’s been holding a spot for me, if I want it.”

Lydia carefully assembles a plate of leftovers, puts it in the fridge, and writes a note with re-
heating instructions. “Don’t look at me like that, it’s just in case Isaac wakes up hungry in the middle of the night. Anyway, I was thinking that maybe I’d move to DC, too.”

“Don’t toy with my emotions, woman,” Stiles says sternly. “Don’t let me get my hopes up if you’re only going to shatter them.”

“I’m serious,” she says. “I don’t really have good friends here, and I don’t like living in the city as much as I thought I would. I’ve liked DC the few times I’ve been there. You’ll both be there. I can waive in without re-taking the bar. It just makes sense.”

Stiles walks Isaac to the subway station in the morning. Winter’s still tightly clinging to the east coast, so they stand on the platform with their chins tucked into their collars and shoulders hunched against the wind.

When the overhead timer clicks down to two minutes, Stiles says, “Thank you. For coming. For helping.”

Isaac nods. “She’s nice. She didn’t deserve what he was doing to her.”

“No one deserves that, Isaac,” Stiles says, putting passion into the words. “Absolutely no one.”

Stiles counts to twenty-six in his head before Isaac speaks again. His voice is hoarse, probably from disuse, and his sentences are broken into rushed little fragments. “I think I’m ready. If you’ll still help. I mean. I know it’s a lot. You don’t have to. But if you wanted.”

“Of course,” Stiles cuts in. His heart jumps at the chance to help Isaac in any way he can. He’s still not sure what he can actually do short of a new identity, but he knows a lot of important people in DC now and there are at least three psychologists he can think of that he likes enough to recommend. “I’ll start as soon as I’m back in DC. Can you meet me on, I don’t know, Thursday? I don’t really have a job anymore, so my schedule’s wide open.”

“I think. Just,” Isaac stutters, looking temporarily frustrated. He closes his eyes and tries again. “If you’re looking for something to do. I know about someone who needs help.”

“What sort of help?”

Isaac extracts a standard manila file from his duffel bag and hands it to Stiles. Lights swing around the bend of the tunnel – Isaac’s train. “She’s being set up for something she didn’t do. She won’t be able to prove she didn’t do it. She’ll probably be killed if no one helps her.”

Stiles blanches. “She’ll probably be killed? Isaac, I don’t know about this. That’s way above my pay grade.”

Isaac adjusts his grip on the bag. “I could help. Scott and Lydia could help.”

Stiles runs his thumb along the edge of the file as Isaac’s train screeches to a halt. The file is several centimeters thick, and a callus catches on something that reads FAA OFFICIAL FINDINGS – CLASSIFIED LEVEL 8. “BryanAir flight 813,” he reads. “Isaac – that’s the plane that disappeared last month.” He flips to the front of the file and looks at the picture and profile pinned to the inside cover. “Who’s Kira Yukimura? Isaac?”

When he looks up, Isaac is seated inside the train. Stiles holds eye contact until the train curves out of view.
Yup. Still enjoying my backstories way, way too much.

All chapter titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.
whispers turned to talking/talking turned to screams

Chapter Summary

“So if you were going to ask if he’s okay,” Lydia says, “The answer is no. He hasn’t slept through the night in over a year. Your uncle spent the past four months running him ragged under the not-unfounded promise that he’ll kill every single person Stiles cares about if he slips up even a little. The man he’s in love with accused him of being a traitor and then stopped acknowledging his existence. He found out that his mother ordered his father’s death to save his life. And now, unless I’m very much mistaken, he’s concocting some sort of plan that involves putting his own life on the line to save your sister. To save all of us. So no, Derek. He’s not okay.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

It’s a waiting game, and Derek has never considered patience to be one of his stronger suits. Luckily he has a wall full of Post-its that might as well be in Elvish to keep himself from sitting around and stewing about Cora’s safety, and even more luckily, Lydia seems content to sit next to him on the coffee table and answer his infinite questions.

"This one. Peter forced Claudia to pick between killing Stiles and killing the sheriff?"

“Recent discovery,” Lydia says, still picking over the remnants of the dinner that Isaac, of all people, managed to pull together from the extremely eccentric contents of Stiles’ fridge. “He only found out when he had to go back to Beacon Hills after his house burned down.”

“His house burned down?” Derek gapes at her.

Lydia nods, carefully inspecting a piece of chicken before putting it in her mouth. “His birthday present from Kate, apparently.”

Derek watches Stiles out of the corner of his eye for a second. Everyone else has long since settled into some activity – Scott and Kira are working on a jigsaw puzzle of corgis wearing hats at the kitchen table, Isaac is methodically cleaning every surface in the kitchen, Erica’s trying to coax Isaac into conversation, Boyd is reading Breakfast of Champions and listening to Derek and Lydia’s Q&A session – but Stiles is…orbiting. He can’t seem to sit still for more than a few minutes at a time, he barely ate, he flits in and out of conversations.

“Is he…?”

“Don’t,” Lydia cuts him off. “Don’t ask that question unless you want an honest answer, Derek Hale. Actually, hold on a second.” She pushes up from the table and disappears into Stiles’ room.

Derek’s still not sure where he stands on any of this. His logical side is shouting that all of this is
absolutely impossible, but everything is just sort of falling into place. Stiles as anything other than stupidly loyal, heart-in-the-right-place, worth-following-to-the-ends-of-the-earth Stiles never made sense. So maybe Derek is stupid and delusional and looking for a way to believe the best in him – but that doesn’t mean it’s not true.

When Lydia reemerges, she’s ditched her pencil skirt (how she wore than for so long, Derek will never know) for Stiles’ Stanford sweatpants and is carrying a thick folder, which she drops in Derek’s lap on her way to pick up her plate and take it to the sink. Derek flicks through the first couple photos it contains in the time it takes her to return, and his throat is tight when she sits next to him again. There are the surveillance photos you take when you’re keeping tabs on someone, and there are the surveillance photos you take when you want to prove that you can get to someone.

These are the latter.

“He’s been getting them since January,” Lydia says, her voice purposefully pitched low. “He’d already been having trouble sleeping. This made it worse.”

Derek flips quickly. The outside of his apartment, the inside of his apartment. Laura’s place, Cora’s work, a picture of his family that looks like it was taken off a hospital surveillance camera from March, Scott and Allison through the window of their apartment, Lydia getting her nails done, even Allen Markings, his arm around a young woman, on the streets of New York.

Derek shuts the folder roughly and offers it back to Lydia. When she doesn’t take it, he puts it on the carpet next to his feet – he doesn’t want it touching him anymore.

“So if you were going to ask if he’s okay,” Lydia says, “The answer is no. He hasn’t slept through the night in over a year. Your uncle spent the past four months running him ragged under the not-unfounded promise that he’ll kill every single person Stiles cares about if he slips up even a little. The man he’s in love with accused him of being a traitor and then stopped acknowledging his existence. He found out that his mother ordered his father’s death to save his life. And now, unless I’m very much mistaken, he’s concocting some sort of plan that involves putting his own life on the line to save your sister. To save all of us. So no, Derek. He’s not okay.”

Derek’s trying to figure out some way to respond that doesn’t make him sound like a colossal asshole when he’s temporarily spared by his phone dinging quietly.

Laura Hale (9:49PM) Do you know what's going on with Cora? She hasn’t responded to me all day and Sean’s being squirrelly.

Laura Hale (9:49PM) Not that Sean’s not normally squirrelly

Laura Hale (9:50PM) Squirrelly-er

“You can’t tell her,” Lydia says immediately, reading over his shoulder.

“Why not?” Derek asks. His thumbs hover over the screen. “She could help.”

“Stiles,” Lydia calls. She snatches the phone away with agility Derek wouldn’t have expected and tosses it over the armchair to Stiles, who frowns at the text and immediately powers the phone off and pockets it.
“Hey!” Derek protests.

“Laura’s shit in a crisis,” Stiles shrugs, not looking the tiniest bit apologetic. “She’s loyal and tough, but she jumps to conclusions and somehow manages to be the least tactful Hale I’ve ever met. Including your cousins from Baton Rogue. She’s not what we need. In the morning, you’ll tell her you fell asleep early. Where does Sean think Cora is?”

“Scouting a location in New Orleans for Laura’s birthday next month,” Erica says, wandering over from the kitchen. Isaac follows. “It was the best I could do on short notice that explained why Cora’s service detail is missing, too.”

“What happened to them?” Scott yawns, turning away from the puzzle.

Erica shakes her head once, a sharp gesture that decisively kills any levity the room was starting to gather. It’s a harsh but necessary reminder of the severity of the situation.

“Okay,” Stiles says, clearly thrown off and trying to recover. “It’s unlikely that Kate will contact us again before tomorrow. I think everyone should stay close tonight. We can’t all fit here in my apartment, but maybe half stay here and half go to Derek’s or Lydia’s? Isaac, which is more secure?”

“The apartment directly above this one is the most secure secondary location,” Isaac says.

“Well, yeah, but –.”

“I own it.”

The look on Stiles’ face is almost comical. “You what now?”

“There were B6-13 agents living there,” Isaac says simply. “Now they’re not.”

Pretty much everyone stares.

“They’re not living there, or they’re not living, Isaac?” Stiles asks after a couple seconds drain away.

Isaac fixes him with a blank stare. “Do you really want to know?”

“Oh, I like him,” Erica says. “Boyd, babe, can we –?”

“No, Erica, we cannot adopt legal adults, how many times do we have to talk about this?”

“Isaac,” Lydia says, talking over the squabble Erica and Boyd descend into. “You actually own the apartment upstairs?”

“Since May,” Isaac confirms. He doesn’t make eye contact, and actually seems to be doing a pretty good job melting into the wall. “I built a trapdoor into the ceiling of the closet in Stiles’ guest bedroom for access.”

“You what?” Stiles says, voice rising a few octaves.

“Talk to me about personal boundaries when you’re not actively planning on antagonizing the single most dangerous man on the face of the planet,” Isaac snaps, effectively killing all arguments. It’s the most he’s ever said in Derek’s presence.

“Fair point, well made,” Stiles admits faintly. “Okay, so, Isaac will sleep in his apartment.”
“We’ll go too,” Erica offers, grabbing Boyd’s wrist and hefting it into the air. “Can I climb through the ceiling?”

***

Something wakes Derek up around one in the morning, according to numbers winking at him from Stiles’ DVR box. It doesn’t take him long to track the quiet noises that jolted him out of a restless sleep on Stiles’ couch to the kitchen, where Stiles is traipsing a continuous circle around the kitchen table and muttering to himself. Every few laps, he pauses to write something in a notebook.

Derek isn’t sure what exactly he’s supposed to do. He seriously doubts he’s the person best suited to calm Stiles down and get him to go back to bed – should he wake up Scott or Lydia? Or just let Stiles tire himself out?

Before he can make up his mind or step around the corner into the moonlight streaming in the kitchen window, the front door swings open slowly and a figure steps through. Starbuck noses around the newcomer’s knees, apparently assured that this human isn’t a threat.

“Allen,” Stiles says, uncertain surprise crossing his face. “What are you doing here?”

“Scott called,” Allen says, taking a few careful steps forward. Stiles moves toward him too, seemingly drifting that way automatically. Derek considers making a loud noise so they’ll know he’s awake – he definitely doesn’t want to be an accidental voyeur.

Stiles stops after a few steps, though, looking at something in Allen’s hand. “What is that?”

“Scott says you haven’t been sleeping,” Allen says, his voice carefully controlled. This is Allen in full doctor mode – this is the Dr. Markings who told Derek about his mother’s coma, who handled Peter’s abrasiveness and Laura’s tears more comfortably than Derek would have thought possible. With his next step forward, light from the window glints off the object in his hand and Derek can make it out. A syringe.

“I don’t have time to sleep now, Allen,” Stiles says, sounding annoyed, and it’s the most emotion Derek’s seen or heard out of him since he told Derek to fuck off earlier.

“Scott says you haven’t slept since Saturday, and that was only for three hours,” Allen says. “Scott says you’ve only been sleeping a few hours a night for most of the summer.”

“I’ve been busy,” Stiles says stubbornly. He physically backpedals a couple steps.

“Keeping people safe, I know. Scott told me.”

“Scott said a lot of things.” Derek can’t see Stiles’ face anymore, but he can imagine the scowl. “He’s worried about you. I am, too. You have to sleep, Stiles.”

“I can’t,” Stiles protests. “Not now. Cora’s – they’ve got Cora, and it’s my – I couldn’t, because Kate, and Peter, and the pictures of everyone, but I still – still couldn’t –.”

It says a lot about how truly fucked up their lives have become that Derek recognizes the sound of Stiles having a panic attack without needing to see him. He has to clench every single one of his
muscles to stop himself from bursting into the kitchen and sprinting to Stiles’ side. He’s still not sure what parts of the madness of the past twenty-four hours he believes, but listening to Stiles’ breath come in stutters and gasps inflicts a second-hand tightness in Derek’s chest. Allen keeps up a low murmur of reassurance while Derek ticks away the seconds in his head to try to stay sane.

“I’m going to put you under now,” Allen says after a few minutes, when Stiles’ breathing still hasn’t evened out. “I know, Stiles, I’m sorry, but if you can’t bring yourself back – look, it’s a weight-based dose. I did the calculations myself. You’ll sleep for four hours, okay? Just four hours. You’ll still be up before everyone else. Okay, just – that’s it. You’re safe. It’s going to be okay. You’re safe.”

Stiles’ breathing finally levels out, and Derek is surprised when quick, sure footsteps bring Allen to Derek’s pseudo-hiding place. “Can you help me with him?” Allen says, carefully snapping a safety cap onto the spent syringe. “He’s not that heavy, it’s just – I’m a little shaky. Don’t want to hurt him.”

Derek moves quickly, scooping Stiles up and depositing him on the couch. Stiles is lighter than he should be, lighter than Derek remembers, and Allen seems to be thinking along the same lines as he holds the syringe up to the hall light and squints at the amount of liquid left.

“He might be out for more like five or six hours,” the doctor says, shaking his head. “Looks like he hasn’t been eating much, so it’ll take him longer to burn through.”

Derek pulls a blanket up and drapes it over Stiles’ chest, then carefully plucks his glasses off his face and sets them on the coffee table. There are deep, dark bruises in the bags under his eyes, his cheeks are gaunt, the lines of worry in his forehead don’t ease even in sleep, and Derek wonders how they – any of them – let it get this bad. Had he really…God, just yesterday Derek had thought that Stiles was somehow, possibly, the mastermind behind the assassination attempts and the Crescent Conflict. He’d let himself believe the worst, believe terrible things, and looking at Stiles now and realizing that he probably contributed, in some small part, to the stress and chaos in Stiles’ life rates a depressing magnitude of shame and guilt.

“I would have been here sooner,” Allen says quietly. “Had a surgery that ran long. You’ll tell Scott I stopped by?”

“Yeah,” Derek says. “Of course. But I think he’ll figure it out on his own when he wakes up and Stiles hasn’t painted Starry Night on the bathroom wall or anything.”

Allen snorts an exhausted half-laugh and heads for the door. Derek follows automatically, intending to lock the door – although Allen clearly has keys, since he let himself in.

“Hey,” Allen says, when he’s one foot out into the hallway. “I don’t know what you guys are involved in. Truth be told, I don’t really want to know. And I’m probably stepping way out of line saying this since Stiles and I went on, like, four dates three years ago, but I care about the guy and I know that you’re the one that broke his heart back then. He’s a good guy, Derek, probably one of the best guys I know, and I really, really don’t like that whatever y’all are in to, I have to come over here and drug him to get him to sleep.” Allen laughs again and rubs at his eyes. “God, and now I’m talking like I’m from Alabama when I’m not even from the South. I don’t really know what I’m trying to say here. Just…take care of him. If you can. If he’ll let you.”

Allen exits, leaving Derek holding the door open. Struck by an odd thought, he carefully props the door with Stiles’ workbag – the bag Derek sent for his birthday, he realizes in passing – and jogs quickly down the hall to where Allen is waiting for the elevator.
“Why did you come?” Derek says when Allen turns to look at him. “I mean, it’s one in the morning, and like you said, four dates three years ago. Why do this?”

Allen looks at him like he’s lost his mind. “Have you met Stiles Stilinski?” He holds up his hands when Derek starts to protest, continuing, “No, I get the question. He…he never asks for help for himself. You know? For his friends, for his clients, for anyone who ranks anywhere on his scale of people of worth, he’ll move heaven and earth and call in every favor he’s owed. But he’ll never ask for himself. And that’s…it’s an idiotic way to live, especially when people would line up to help you the way people would line up for Stiles. So when someone calls in a favor on behalf of someone like Stiles, you answer. Sorry, I’m really tired – is any of this making sense?”

The elevator chimes its arrival, and Allen steps in and hits the button for the ground floor.

“Yeah,” Derek says, replaying Allen’s words. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Plus, he saved my life once,” Allen adds, as the door starts to roll closed. “I figure I owe the guy five hours of sleep.”

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Stiles wakes up sluggish, which he hates, and with a hypodermic needle mark on his left forearm and a dim memory of Allen showing up in the middle of the night. He also has a relatively large chocolate Lab snuffling under his chin, and once Starbuck realizes he’s awake she licks a long stripe up the side of his face and clambers off him ungracefully.

All things considered, it’s not the weirdest way he’s woken up in recent memory. Mainly because he woke up, which means he slept. He makes a mental note to call Allen – either to thank him or berate him about the ethical implications of drugging someone without his express consent – and gropes around for his glasses, which he promptly knocks off the coffee table. When the world blurs into focus, he’s greeted by the sight of Derek sleeping at an awkward angle in his armchair. The DVR blinks 6:24AM.

Is this what sleeping for more than three hours at a stretch feels like? Because it’s kind of great.

He yawns his way to the kitchen and pokes at the coffeemaker until it starts burbling promisingly. Isaac’s apparently been up for awhile, since there’s a box of bagels on the counter and Starbuck isn’t scratching at the door for her morning walk/potty break like she normally would be. He staggers through his bedroom – Scott’s still sacked out – and is a few minutes into a delightfully hot shower when everything that happened yesterday comes crashing back into his brain all at once. He comes very close to breaking his neck trying to hurry through the rest of his shower, then possibly actually breaks a toe trying to get dressed without waking Scott up. He hops back out to the living room to find Lydia carefully rearranging Post-its after the frenzy of last night and Kira squinting at the code running across her screen.

“Anything?” He asks hopefully. They’ll wake Derek up, but who cares – it’s nearly seven anyway.

“Not yet, and nothing overnight,” Kira says. “I’ve got a program trawling for anything even resembling the channel Kate opened yesterday, but it’s unlikely to hit on anything until the cloned...”

“I’ve been awake for exactly eighteen minutes, Kira.”

He swings past the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee and then joins Lydia in fixing the Wonderland Wall. “And how about you, beautiful? How are you doing?”

“Jackson wants to have lunch,” she says. “I’m using purple highlighter to indicate everything that’s immediately relevant to the situation at hand.”

“We’re probably going to need Jackson’s influence at the DA’s office to get us through the fallout of the next few days.”

“Stiles Stilinski, I am not going to pretend to reconcile with my boyfriend so that my quote-unquote boss can push an unsavory agenda through the court system.”

Stiles waits, humming.

“I may, however, allow my boyfriend to buy me an outrageously expensive lunch to begin making up for the fact that he has possessive, jackass-ish tendencies.”

“That’s my girl,” Stiles praises, offering a Post-it for highlighting.

“Jackson’s ‘the boyfriend’ again?” Scott asks, poking a bleary-eyed head out of Stiles’ room. “How’d that happen?”

“What time is it?” Derek adds, stretching so broadly that he tips himself out of the armchair and onto the carpet – Starbuck’s territory, as Derek learns when Starbuck trots over and inserts her nose in his ear.

The front door opens in time for Isaac and Boyd to see a still half-asleep Derek try to squirm away from the invading Labrador and end up getting a leg jammed under the couch.


A muffled thump from the guest bedroom and Erica’s “That will never not be awesome” answers his question.

Still not the weirdest way Stiles has woken up.

“I need to text Laura back,” Derek yawns a few minutes later, when they’re all settled at the table with coffee/tea/orange juice and bagels are being passed around. He flaps his hand in a give-it-to-me motion. “I’m always awake by seven on weekdays, she’ll know something’s up if I don’t respond. And I should call in sick for the next few days.”

“Keep it vague,” Stiles says, digging Derek’s phone from his pocket and turning it back on. He thumbs in the passcode from memory – 0617, still no idea what that signifies – and checks to make sure there’s no one else Derek needs to respond to. “Who’s Daniel Masterson?”

“Air Force co-Captain,” Lydia answers before Derek can. “Don’t you remember? I vetted him back when the president first hired us, to make sure he wouldn’t out Derek accidentally or on purpose.”

Stiles frowns, cycling through memories. He hadn’t actually met the guy, and the headshot had just been one of those generic, vaguely familiar military ID pictures that could have belonged to anyone.

“He’s the one who told me about Argent Arms’ involvement,” Derek says, finally just leaning
across the table and grabbing his phone out of Stiles’ hands. “Hey, actually – he’d probably be really helpful for whatever we try to do. He’s active military, keeps a cool head even when we’re getting shot at. We don’t know how many people we’re going to be going up against, can’t hurt to bolster the numbers a little bit.”

Stiles feels his frown deepen. “I don’t like relying on people I don’t know.”

“I can vouch for him,” Boyd offers, surprising everyone. “His callsign’s Tomcat, right? Our units ran together during my last tour. He’s a good guy. Won’t ask too many questions.”

Scott bumps his knee into Stiles’ under the table in a way that Stiles interprets as we’re-in-way-over-our-heads-with-this-and-if-you-honestly-expect-us-to-storm-a-probably-heavily-guarded-bad-guy-hideout-if-would-be-a-good-idea-to-get-more-professionals-on-our-side.

Twelve years of best friendship, and their unspoken communication has officially graduated to run-on sentences.

“Okay,” Stiles says begrudgingly. “Have him come over. And – I can’t believe I’m saying this – we’re going to need guns.”

“Stiles!” Kira shouts a few minutes after 2PM. “The channel’s opening!”

Everyone freezes for the same two seconds and then jumps into action in the third. They spent the entire morning planning for this moment – well, Lydia went to lunch with Jackson and Scott stopped by Calistoga to apologize to Allison for not making it home the night before – but they mostly planned exactly how they need this conversation to go and how long it needs to last, so by the time Stiles’ TV – hooked to Kira’s laptop – brings up the feed of Cora in the same uncomfortable-looking metal chair, everyone’s in place.

Stiles, the only person in the frame on their side of things, leans forward. “Cora. Are you okay?”

“Oh, I’m dandy,” she replies. She’s not gagged this time, so there’s that, but either Ethan or Aiden is standing next to her with an unnecessarily large rifle. “This jackass is going to shoot me if I say anything about where I am, though, so let’s avoid the leading questions.”

Stiles consciously ignores the full-body flinch Derek, pressed up against the far wall, gives. They’d all agreed on this: Kate and Peter don’t know that Derek knows, and it should stay that way. Stiles also ignores Kira, who has her laptop jury-rigged to Stiles’ and a computer Isaac had produced from upstairs and is working on all three keyboards at once. “You’re going to be fine, Cora.”

“Oh, I’m going to be more than fine,” she says, a ghost of a grin crossing her face. “They killed Bethany and Sanjay in front of me, and I think they still haven’t realized what a mistake that was.”

“Your threats are adorable, niece, but the men are talking now,” Peter says, walking into view. “Stiles. I take it from the fact that I did not receive notification of my sister’s emergency appendectomy or some other flimsy excuse that Talia is not invoking the 25th amendment, and will therefore not be acquiescing to the first of my very reasonable requests just yet.”

Stiles leans further forward. “That was a risk, coming on screen. What if the president had been in the room with me? You really willing to tip your hand this early?”

“You’re predictable, Stiles, you and my sister both,” Peter says. “She’ll stay in office until the last
possible moment to delay making the choice between her responsibility as a mother and her duty as the president, and in the meantime, she’ll pretend none of this is happening and delegate the situation to you.”

“Interesting theory,” Stiles says. Diagonally behind him, Kira whispers something to Erica, who mouths something over his head to Lydia, who writes quickly on a small whiteboard and holds it up into his line of vision. 30 seconds. “Completely wrong, but interesting.”

Peter smirks. “And how goes the search for your dear mother?”

“Well, I left a gingerbread house in the park,” Stiles muses. “So I’d say things are pretty status quo around the Stilinski family dinner table.”

“I wonder,” Peter says silkily, “if she’s told you about your father?”

Icy steel touches down at various points along Stiles’ spine, and he knows he’s handling this wrong. This is not how he talks during a kidnapping negotiation – this is not how he talks ever when he’s on the job – but he can’t stop the words coming out of his mouth. “That you forced her to kill him, me, or die herself? Yeah, we had that talk. Good bonding experience. Thanks for that.”

Peter takes a few steps closer, peering into the lens, and Stiles can almost feel his gaze like a physical touch. “No, Stiles. Has she told you where he is now?”

There is a very cold, logical part of Stiles that recognizes this tactic. There is also a much more powerful part of Stiles that shakes off dust, coughs, and turns over in his chest.

15 seconds.

“Are we having a philosophical discussion about the afterlife?” Stiles asks, trying to make his voice light. “Because I’ve got to say, I prefer to have these conversations face-to-face. Why don’t you stop by later?”

“I wonder if she even knows,” Peter says, tapping a finger on his chin. “I thought she would have kept tabs on the file, but perhaps not. Perhaps it was too painful for her to revisit.”

“You’re drifting, Peter,” Stiles says, and this time he doesn’t even attempt to hide the mess of emotions that are evident in his tone.

“Am I? Forgive me, but I do think a man should know when his father is alive.”

Stiles’ whole world narrows to the TV screen. He can’t feel his fingertips, although he supposes that’s not particularly important at this exact instant. “You’re lying.”

“I assure you, I’m not,” Peter says, oily smirk back on his face. “Once I realized what extraordinary leverage you and your father provided over your mother, I decided to keep all my options open in case I ever needed multiple cards to play against her. He’s been in a Chinese prison for…four years now?”

We have the location. You can stop.

“The funeral was open-casket,” Stiles chokes. He wonders if it’s possible to asphyxiate on your own heart. He files it away to ask Allen.

“Any number of drugs can simulate death long enough for a forty-five minute funeral service,” Peter says dismissively. “Now, back to business. If Cora here isn’t quite enough incentive for you,
allow me to sweeten the deal. Give me what I want, and I’ll give your father back to you. 4PM on Friday, Stiles.”

Peter clears off screen in time for the feed to freeze on an image of Cora, looking stricken. The green light of the camera flickers off.

“Stiles,” someone says, but the second he gets feeling back in his lower extremities he bolts for the door, and ten years of being a dedicated runner finally pay off.

**February, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term (0.5 years ago)**

“I was defending you!” Derek shouts, following Stiles through the door of his apartment and shutting it roughly behind him. Starbuck barks a quick greeting and then scampers for Stiles’ bedroom, sensing the tension in the air.

“I don’t need defending!” Stiles roars back. “I have been getting called names like that since I was seventeen, Derek! I’m twenty-nine now, I’m all grown up, and I can take care of myself.”

“He had no right to –.”

“No, he didn’t!” Stiles cuts him off. “No one has the right to say things like that to anyone else. But Jesus, Derek, we – we went to a dive of a sports bar on the conservative side of the District, and I dressed like a college twink instead of an actual adult because I wasn’t thinking.”

That stops Derek in his tracks. “You – what?”

Stiles skids a water bottle haphazardly across the counter towards him. “For the love of God, Derek, look at me. How old do I look right now?”

Stiles holds his hands out to his sides and Derek appraises him on command. He doesn’t really see Stiles out of his business clothes that often, but yeah, this – tight jeans, thick-framed glasses, a v-neck that clings closer than it probably should, a faded Stanford zip-up that does nothing to hide how Stiles’ hips narrow in a way that should be illegal for someone Derek is trying to just be friends with – he’d believe Stiles as a college kid.

“Yeah, but – I’m gay, and he didn’t say anything to me,” Derek protests, taking a long drag of the water to quench his suddenly dry throat.

Stiles gives him a disgusted, frustrated look. “Do I really need to remind you that you are Derek fucking Hale?”

The words have their usual impact – knocking Derek back to destroying Stiles on Election Day, Stiles throwing those words back at him in the hospital after the shooting, a continuous feedback loop of self-delusion and arrogance that makes shame taste like vinegar on his tongue. “What does that have to do with anything?” He demands through a clenched jaw.

“But you’re…you,” Derek says. “You were my mom’s press secretary. And Stilinski & Associates is…is…”

"'Infamous' is the word you’re looking for,” Stiles deadpans. “Most of my clients try to avoid publicly interacting with me. Which I encourage.”

Derek deflates. “I was just trying to help.”

Stiles sighs and tugs his sweatshirt off over his head, completely ignoring the zipper. The movement drags at his t-shirt and exposes the line of dark hair trailing from his navel down past his belt. Derek drinks more water.

“Almost starting a bar fight because one drunk asshole said something rude to me isn’t ‘helping,’” Stiles says. “I get that you’re still new to the whole being out and proud thing and you want to flap your sparkly butterfly wings all over the place and paint the world with rainbows, but you’ve really just got to chill the fuck out sometimes.”

Derek stares at him. “My sparkly butterfly wings?”

“It’s a metaphor, jerkwad. Come on, we can watch the rest of the game on my TV.”

***

Derek asks Scott to have dinner with him on Friday. He means it as a grab-a-bite-to-eat, let’s-talk-about-the-thing-I-need-to-talk-about-for-ten-minutes-and-then-go-our-separate-ways thing, Scott somehow gets them a reservation at Calistoga, the French/Italian/American place that everyone’s always raving about and is usually booked weeks in advance.

Derek supposes he really shouldn’t be surprised when he shows up and Isaac is sitting in the booth next to Scott.

“Hey,” he says, sliding in across from them. “Thanks for this. I just wanted to talk for a minute.”

“No problem.” Scott makes a hand gesture Derek doesn’t recognize at a waitress, who smiles brightly and disappears into the kitchen. “Your text sounded worried. What’s up?”

“You know what you came over to talk to me about last November?” Derek asks, giving a sidelong glance to Isaac. He notices, perhaps belatedly, that the knife is missing from Isaac’s place setting and the muscles in Isaac’s forearm are tense.

“When I asked you to watch out for Stiles?” Scott says bluntly. “Isaac knows.”

“Yeah, that,” Derek says. “Anyway. We were at a bar a few nights ago and some jackass said some things to Stiles that got me pretty pissed off. Luke and Chen got us out before things could really go south, but I saw the way the guy and his friends were looking at Stiles as we left and…” Derek drums his fingers on the tablecloth. “I don’t know. I’m probably overreacting.”

“What bar?” Isaac demands, his eyes flickering.

“Uh, Stanley Bridges. The one over on State Street.”

“What night?”
“Tuesday.”

“Do you know the men who threatened him?”

“No, I –.”

Scott cuts Derek off with a wave of the hand and nods toward the door of the kitchen, which swings open to admit two waiters carrying heavily-laden trays followed by a familiar brunette in stained chef’s whites. She pecks Scott on the cheek and ruffles Isaac’s hair affectionately, something Derek would have thought impossible to do without losing a hand if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes. “Hi, guys,” she beams. “Derek, I don’t know if you remember me.”

“Allison,” Derek manages, still stunned over the fact that Isaac is blushing and ducking his head instead of retaliating with undue violence. “We met a couple times.” For example, at the engagement party for me and your aunt, who tried to kill my mother.

“We did,” she confirms, still grinning ear-to-ear. “Okay, I got a little excited when Scott said he was bringing you here – I’m so glad you’re all finally becoming friends – and I may have gone a little overboard.”

“For example, at the engagement party for me and your aunt, who tried to kill my mother.”

“Just a little, babe?” Scott says, sliding one of the twelve or so dishes down toward Isaac to make room for the plates that just keep coming.

“Maybe a lot,” Allison admits. “You don’t come here often enough! He won’t let me cook for him at home,” she adds, stage whispering conspiratorially to Derek. “Thinks it’s too much like work. Right, I’ve got to get back to the kitchen – busy night. Let me know how everything is! Good to see you again, Derek.”

“Likewise,” Derek mumbles, watching Allison veritably skip away.

“She’s amazing, isn’t she?” Scott says, taking in the undoubtedly dazed look on Derek’s face.

“Yeah, yeah, she – she doesn’t know anything about what you guys actually do, does she?” Derek asks on impulse.

Scott visibly flinches; Isaac’s glare intensifies to near-audible levels.

“She understands the general concept,” Scott says carefully. “Case specifics are off-limits, obviously. We have a deal: she doesn’t ask questions I can’t answer, and I don’t lie to her. And about the guys from Tuesday – we’ll take care of it.”

Derek rolls with the overtly transparent subject change. “How can I help?”

“You can’t,” Scott says simply. “One of the bartenders at Stanley owes me a couple dozen favors. Consider it handled.”

“But I –.”

“So, Derek,” Scott interrupts. “Stiles tells me you belong to Fox & Hole. Maybe we should box sometime.”
True Life: I'm in Love with Erica Reyes

All chapter titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.
i reached for you, but you where gone (i knew i had to go back home)

Chapter Summary


“But Stiles, if he’s alive,” Scott tries.

“If he’s – we’re believing Peter now?” Stiles interjects. “Peter. Who was very obviously trying to throw me off balance.”

“If there’s even a chance –.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Stiles cuts Lydia off. “The probability of my dad being alive is 99 to 1 at best. We’re not risking Cora’s life on those odds. We’re just…not.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“He’s been gone for two hours,” Kira says. “How long do we wait before going after him? What do we do?”

“He’ll be back soon,” Scott says. “He’ll be back, and we’ll make a plan, and everything will be fine.”

Derek twists his fingers deeper into the pillow he’s strangling. Some version of this exchange has occurred every ten minutes for the past, yes, two hours, and Derek is…Derek is…

He has no idea, honestly. He’s somewhere on the confused/impatient/worried spectrum, but every time he gets close to pinpointing an specific emotion, someone else points out how long Stiles has been gone and it all blurs together again. Seeing Peter onscreen taunting Stiles about his father and talking coldly about Talia had done wonders to cement Derek’s belief in and understanding of the insanity of the situation, now he’s...focused. Calm. Ready. In combat mode.

They know where Cora is. Kira traced the signal, forty-five minutes northwest to an old warehouse district in Maryland. They know where Cora is, but they all also know that they need Stiles’ brain if they have any chance of getting her out.

And Stiles is gone.

Not that Derek can blame him. The look on Stiles’ face when Peter started talking about his father doesn’t bear remembering. The look on Stiles’ face when Peter said that the sheriff is still alive will probably feature in Derek’s nightmares for awhile.

What if it’s true?
What it it’s not?

The door bangs open loudly, everyone jumps three feet into the air, and Stiles – flushed, breathing heavily, drenched in sweat – holds out a hand and demands, “Isaac. Keys.”

Stiles comes back down from Isaac’s apartment fifteen minutes later, showered and in clothes that don’t quite fit him. He returns Isaac’s keys, gets a glass of water, sits next to Kira, and says, “Show me a map of where we’re going.”

“Stiles.”

“Not now, Scott.”

“Stiles.”

“Not now, Lydia.”

“Stiles.”


“But Stiles, if he’s alive,” Scott tries.

“If he’s – we’re believing Peter now?” Stiles interjects. “Peter. Who was very obviously trying to throw me off balance.”

“If there’s even a chance –.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Stiles cuts Lydia off. “The probability of my dad being alive is 99 to 1 at best. We’re not risking Cora’s life on those odds. We’re just…not.”

Derek wonders if it makes him the most selfish person on the planet that his veins flood with relief at Stiles’ words. Guilt follows almost immediately, prompting him to say, “What if he is, though?”

Stiles smiles weakly. “Then we’ll find him. How many people can there possibly be in Chinese prisons?”

“One point seven to two and a half million, depending on the reference source,” Kira says immediately. “We looked it up while you were…out.”

“Great,” Stiles says. “But we don’t research one case while we’re working on another. Show me a map of where we’re going.”

***

It’s barely even a plan at this point, Stiles thinks a few hours later. An abandoned warehouse in a block of abandoned warehouses, an unknown number of highly trained, completely lethal opponents. If Stiles had his way, they’d do two weeks of round-the-clock surveillance and then make a plan. But they don’t have two weeks – they have less than forty-eight hours – and everyone
keeps looking at him like they’re expecting him to burst into tears at any moment, so maybe it’s best that they just get a move on.

He’d consider crying, if he thought it would be beneficial in any way, shape, or form. And honestly, during his two-hour windsprint around the District, it had seemed like a good idea at some point. Of course, so had rigging Peter’s car to explode, flying to China immediately, talking the president into pulling out of Bahrain, and serving up his mother on a silver platter.

He’s still not completely past the exploding car idea, if he’s being totally honest.

Lydia, of course, is not at all pleased with their little plan nugget, and is making it plainly known as they clean up after dinner.

“We are not the crew of Leverage,” she says. “We blackmail, we handle extortion attempts, we do not break into heavily armed compounds and extract captives.”

Stiles grins at her. He's still feeling a little unhinged, but it's...manageable. “You should be glad you didn’t know me and Scott before L3.”

She angles a plate so the spray of water splashes onto his shirt. “I probably don’t want to know, do I?”

“Hey Scott,” Stiles calls, raising his voice. “Does Lydia want to know what we did the summer between L1 and L2?”

“Don’t care if she wants to know,” Scott shouts back from the living room. “I don’t want her to know, because I prefer my balls actually attached to my body.”

Lydia makes a disgusted noise and shuts the dishwasher with authority.

“Did I come at a bad time?”

Every head in the room whips toward the door, where Danny – fuck, Danny – is standing with a bag of takeout in one hand.

Stiles vaults over the counter and runs toward the door. “Danny, Stiles, slow down,” Danny says. “It’s okay.”

“Can we reschedule? This weekend should be…” Stiles freezes. “Why are you calling me Stiles?”

Danny raises his eyebrows. “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

Stiles takes two quick steps back and pulls his handgun from the waistband of his pants, leveling it at Danny’s chest. “You call me Dylan.”

Derek chooses this moment to emerge from the bathroom, absorb the entire situation in two seconds flat, and calmly say, “Stiles, why are you pointing a gun at my best friend’s heart?”

Okay. So. Interesting development.

“Hey, Kingpin,” Danny says, waving a hand behind his head in the general direction of the bathroom. “I should probably explain.”

“Yeah, do that,” Stiles says, motioning for Danny to come inside. He complies, setting the takeout
bag carefully on the kitchen table where it settles with a series of distinctly un-takeout-like clacks. Stiles peeks in passing. “Guns. Of course. Why is the takeout bag full of guns?”

“Derek told me to bring guns,” Danny says, like that makes sense.

“You asked me to tell Daniel to bring guns,” Derek adds. Still not making any sense.

Wait.

Danny – Stiles’ Danny from Coffee – is Derek’s Daniel from the Air Force?

Maybe it’s just been a stressful day, but Stiles really doesn’t think he’s overreacting when he flicks his safety off and says, “If you’re B6-13, I’m going to shoot you in the head. Fair warning.”

Derek’s palm collides with Stiles’ forearm before he can follow through, and a few seconds of chaos erupt that end with Boyd pointing a gun at Danny/Daniel, Isaac pressing that damn boning knife to Derek’s throat, and Erica lightly pinning Stiles in a sleeper hold.

“Everyone except Boyd is going to back the fuck off in exactly five seconds, or Kira’s going to get her nun-chucks out,” Lydia says, somehow sounding authoritative and supremely bored in the same sentence. “Five. Four. Three. Good, isn’t that nicer?”

Stiles braces his hands against his knees, sucking in heaving breaths that make his head spin but clear his vision.


“No,” Danny says emphatically, then furrows his brow. “Wait. Maybe. I don’t know what B6-13 is, so I guess I’m not sure. I don’t think so.”

“Wonderland,” Stiles says, rubbing at his throat ruefully. He should probably just be thankful that Erica didn’t use her nails. “Peter Hale. Claire Collins. Getting your rocks off by killing people.”

Danny’s eyes go to Derek. “What does your uncle have to do with anything?”

Derek lets out a miserable little huff of laughter. “Fuck if I know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me your real name?” Stiles demands, not in the mood for a brotherly bonding moment.

“To be fair,” Danny says slowly, starting to look more comfortable, “You didn’t tell me your real name, either.”

Boyd growls something sub-vocal and shifts his aim from Danny’s chest to his kneecap.

Danny tries to back off half a step, only to encounter Erica’s not-unremarkable chest at his shoulder. He pales a little. “Not the time to split hairs. Got it. Look,” he continues, shifting his gaze to Stiles. “The president asked me to keep an eye on you when you and Derek started spending time together again. I figured you’d trust me more if you didn’t know I was already connected to Derek. That’s all, I swear.”

‘Keep an eye on me?’” Stiles parrots. “We hung out once, and you kissed me and disappeared from the face of the planet for a month.”

“You kissed him?” Derek repeats, looking outraged. “You’re married!”
"You're married?" Stiles repeats.

"Divorced!" Danny protests.

"Divorced?" Derek shouts. "Since when? You're supposed to be straight!"

"I never said –."

"Shut up!" Stiles shouts, a wave of exhaustion hitting him post-adrenaline crash. That’s starting to become a worrying trend – apparently, five and a half hours of sleep don’t make up for months of stress-induced insomnia. Who knew? But even running on fumes, his brain starts slotting Rod A into Hole B, and it’s only a matter of a few seconds before he reaches enough conclusions to say, “Oh, you were part of the Bahrain occupancy. That’s where you went, that's why you stopped responding to me. Okay, then,” and sits down at the kitchen table.

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That’s apparently not enough for Scott, who exclaims, “What – no – that’s not just okay!” but Stiles shoots him a look and Scott quiets down, fuming silently.

Daniel, doing what he does best – adapting to changes – looks over at Derek. “So, are you going to tell me why I brought every personal and service weapon I could get my hands on to a civilian’s private residence, or are you gonna make me guess?”

“Cora’s been kidnapped,” Derek says tersely, and he can actually see the moment Daniel clicks over into military ops mode. “Kate’s involved.”

“I’ll save the ‘I told your stupid ass she was bad news’ speech for another day,” Daniel says, then looks to Boyd pointedly. “Were you really going to shoot me, Vernon Boyd? I saved your skin more than a few times when things went ass over ankles in the sandbox.”

Boyd shrugs and puts his safety back on. “Nothing personal. I’ve got a job to do.”

Daniel shakes Boyd’s hand. “Looks like we’re on the same team for now. What do we know?”

From there, it’s weirdly familiar territory. Putting his head together with Daniel, sketching out a map of what they know about the area and the enemy, discussing different incursion tactics. Boyd and Erica, both former Army Rangers, know more about ground assault, so the Air Force defers to the Rangers on some points. The S&A team mostly sits in Stiles’ living room and talks through different ways to minimize publicity, the implications of removing Peter’s influence from the Crescent Conflict, and how to return everyone’s lives to status quo by sunup. Stiles ping-pongs between the two conversations.

By 10PM, they have a… well, it’s not really a plan, per say. Derek and Daniel’s old SO would probably have them both court martialed if he saw the gaps in intel. But no one wants to vocalize even the possibility of putting this off another day, so the group gathers around Stiles’ kitchen table for a last round of coffee and details before rolling out.

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“Keep your comm in at all times,” Kira says sternly, walking around the circle and handing everyone a tiny little earpiece – a bag of which Isaac had produced from his apartment. “I’ve already paired them to your phones, so I’ll know where everyone is. You’ll be able to hear me and Lydia, but not each other.”

“I’m still not thrilled about having to stay in the van with Kira,” Lydia says for the umpteenth time, accepting her earpiece and tucking it behind her curtain of hair nonetheless.

“We need you looking at the big picture, Lyds,” Stiles says, adjusting his own comm unit. “If I run into Peter, I’m going to need you in my head talking me through it. And there’s no van – you’ll be in my Jeep.”

“Semantics,” she sniffs.

“We’re outnumbered,” Danny says to the group, following Kira around the circle and distributing weapons from his takeout bag like a grown-up, incredibly foreboding Santa Claus. “We’re betting on at least a dozen bad guys, and only seven of us will be out in the field. Shoot carefully, conserve your ammo. Scott, do you know how to use this?”

“I’m from Texas,” Scott says, smoothly ejecting the magazine of the semi-automatic pistol Danny handed him, checking the barrel, and re-loading. “I know how to use a gun.”

Danny looks amused as he passes over two extra magazines. “All right, then. Stiles.”

“I’m all set,” Stiles says, brushing his fingers across the grip of his Ruger SR9. He’s not sure if he’ll actually be able to shoot anyone – not to kill them, anyway – but the last thing he needs right now is an unfamiliar gun in his hand.

“Not what I was going to say.” Danny rolls his shoulders back, standing a little straighter. Stiles is once again temporarily floored by the difference between this Danny and the Danny that can rattle off every starter the Yankees have had for the past ten years. He’s consciously blocking the part of his brain that wants to shout at Danny for being a lying, lieface liar - they don't have time for that. “You’re not going to like this, but I’ve got guys who can help.”

“No,” is the first thing out of Stiles’ mouth, even before he’s finished processing what Danny’s saying. “No, absolutely not.”

“Just two of them,” Danny says, talking over Stiles’ protests. “Two guys I’ve served with and trust with my life – Parrish and Lahey. They trust me, they’ll listen to me, and they’re both on leave right now. If I show up at their door and say I need them, they’ll follow me.”

“Nine’s better than seven,” Scott says with a shrug that brushes his sleeve against Stiles’.

Stiles looks across the table to Derek, who’s looking back at him with open, understanding eyes, and if Stiles hadn’t already put up every wall he knows how to, that’d probably be enough to do him in. He’s actively not thinking about his father, he’s actively not thinking about what will happen to Cora if they fail, he’s actively not thinking about the fact that he’s about to walk the people he cares most about into a situation that will, in all likelihood, get all of them horribly, horribly killed.

But he can’t not think about Derek. Derek’s done a phenomenal job of building loopholes into all of Stiles’ defenses, and right now he’s looking at Stiles the way he looked at him backstage after the disastrous Louisiana gubernatorial debate, and it’s all Stiles can do to not burst into some
 Instead, he repeats, “Nine’s better than seven,” and looks away.

Danny nods. “I’ll pick them up on my way over. So that’s Kira, Lydia, and Isaac with Stiles. Scott with Erica and Boyd. Derek with me. We meet at the corner of Parkfield and Rummsley at 11:15. Are we good?”

Stiles takes one last look around the room. Himself, Scott, Lydia, Isaac, Kira, Derek, Erica, Boyd, Danny.

Yeah, he thinks. This’ll do.

June, Summer between L1 and L2 (7.25 years ago)

Stiles wakes up the day after his last exam of L1 with a wicked hangover, six bananas down the front of his pants, and an unfamiliar phone number scrawled across his forearm in permanent marker. Scott, one couch over in their incredibly trashed apartment, is still asleep and has a stripe shaved down the middle of his scalp.

He’s nauseous and achy all over. Riley is passed out in the shower, and Brenda and Lori are asleep in his bed. There are darts embedded in basically every solid surface (and really, what asshole thought it was a good idea to popularize pointy projectiles as a drinking game?) and the sink in the kitchen is clogged with some vile-smelling mixture that Stiles vaguely remembers involving mayonnaise and molasses.

All in all, great success.

He rolls Riley out of the shower and stands under the life-giving water for several long minutes, patiently letting hazy, broken memories of last night piece themselves together. He feels far better than he probably deserves (Riley pukes twice while Stiles is in the shower, and he’s feeling remarkably non-nauseous), so he manages to get dressed without waking the girls and heads outside for a run.

In Stiles’ experience, hungover running will either cure you or kill you. Sometimes literally almost kill you, if you run into the street without paying attention. But Stiles is still alive and he’s officially ranked in the top 5% of his class, so he takes the medium loop around the park a mile from their apartment and feels approximately eight times more alive when he returns.

Scott, for his part, is staring at the egg yolks floating listlessly around in a frying pan.

“I can’t make eggs,” he says in a far sadder tone of voice than a human has ever achieved when discussing preparation of breakfast food.

“It helps if you turn the stove on,” Stiles says, gently guiding Scott to a chair and filling two glasses of water. “I’ll do it. Drink this.”
Scott obediently gulps, repeatedly sticking out his tongue at the taste of his own mouth. “I hate you. I can barely move. You’re not human.”

“Stilinski livers are superior to all other livers,” Stiles says. He adds a splash of milk to the eggs and cranks the heat. “Also, I stopped drinking around 1, I think.”

“Jerk,” Scott moans. “Why didn’t you make me stop?”

“Because, and I quote, ‘Texas boys ain’t afraid of whiskey.’”

“Kill me. Quickly. Put me out of my misery. I’m supposed to be on a plane in nine hours.”

Stiles roots around for a spatula. The only one he can find is embedded in a bowl of guacamole. “The good old McCall Ranch. It’s hard to believe this will be the last time you go home to it.”

Something angry flies across Scott’s face. It’s such a rare emotion to see on Scott that Stiles hones in. “Dude. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing you need to worry about,” Scott grouses. Stiles watches him carefully – Scott might actually be on the Still Drunk end of the hangover spectrum.

“You’re a shitty liar,” Stiles tells him, scooping scrambled eggs into the only available clean receptacle (a Solo cup) and handing it to Scott.

“I’m an excellent liar, you just know me too well,” Scott retorts. “There’s just some shit I have to handle when I get home.”

Anger is rare for Scott; swearing is a once-in-a-blue-moon event. “Dude. Tell me what’s going on. And use a fork, Christ, here.”

Scott looks at him guiltily, scrambled egg dripping from his fingers, and accepts the fork. “You know how I told you that the ranch was in my grandma’s name, and since she died last month everything transferred to me and I decided to sell?”

“To the Gutierrez family, because you’re not moving back to Texas after law school.” Stiles forks up some of his own eggs, eating straight out of the pan. “Sure.”

“I didn’t tell you that my dad showed up.”

“Your dad?” Stiles inhales a piece of egg. “Your dad, like, Rafael McCall? Certified alcoholic deadbeat? The one who left you to live with your grandma after your mom died and fell off the face of the earth except for holidays? That dad?”

Scott nods glumly. “He found a loophole in my grandma’s will. Or bribed the executor, I’m not sure. But he got control of the deeds to the land, bet them on a boxing match, and lost them. To this bastard Bill Hoshtek who’ll probably sell everything off and fire everyone.”

Stiles gapes at him. “Scott. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Scott, who seems to have sobered up given the topic of discussion, gives a listless shrug. “Didn’t see the point. There’s nothing you can do.”

“But you love that ranch. It’s where you grew up. It’s the only place you have memories with your mom. You picked the Gutierrez people to take it over because you knew they’d take care of it.”

Scott just shrugs again. “Doesn’t matter. A bet’s a binding contract in Texas. I have until the end of
August to pack up, then we’re out of there forever. I’m going to take a shower. Thanks for the eggs.”

“Riley’s on the floor of the bathroom. Just step around him.”

Stiles begins cleaning the kitchen on autopilot, giving his hands something to do so his mind can focus. He needs a few more hours of sleep and about a gallon of water before he’s back to full functional capacity, but the threads of a plan – a ludicrous, risky, stupid plan – are starting to weave themselves together.

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Rafael McCall is six feet, four inches of rugged good looks and apologies when he picks them up from the San Antonio International Airport. Stiles sits quietly in the back of the truck and lets the Texas air – already unbearably humid, even though it’s only the second day of June – rush past his ears while Scott and his father argue on the hour and a half drive out to the McCall Ranch. This is the farthest south Stiles has ever been, and he keeps having to quash Walker, Texas Ranger jokes as the landscape transitions from the metropolis of San Antonio to the sprawling suburbs and finally to the expansive, rolling fields and plains that would take them all the way to Mexico if they just kept driving.

It’s almost midnight by the time they turn onto a long, unpaved drive leading to a slightly rundown building that Stiles can only describe as a homestead. He walks slowly behind Scott and Rafael, still arguing, but stops on the porch instead of following them inside. He’s definitely starting to feel the effects of the previous night’s activities, but holy shit – he finally understands why people call Texas Big Sky Country.

“It’s something else, isn’t it?” Scott says after a few minutes, joining him on the porch. He hands Stiles a glass of what turns out to be sweet tea. “My mom and I used to spend hours out here during the summer. She knew all the constellations, even the weird old pagan ones. When the weather was bad, we’d sit out here and watch storms roll in across the plain.”

“I think I get why you love it here.”

“Nah, you don’t,” Scott says. “Give it a week. We’ll meet the guys, you’ll ride a horse, I’ll take you out over the land. Mateo will put you to work doing something backbreaking and repetitive. We’ll make dinner with the crew, go to bed at eight, get up at five. Give it a week, and then you might understand.”

Stiles lets that sink in. Something howls, way off in the distance. “How’s your dad?”

Scott braces his elbows on the porch railing. “Different than I remember. How much did you hear?”

“I tuned you out somewhere around Helotes.”

“He said he’s been sober for five years. Showed me his chip, gave me his sponsor’s number to call if I don’t believe him.”

“Do you?”
Scott huffs a sigh into his tea. “I want to. But I don’t think that’s the same thing.”

“What did he have to say about losing the deeds?”

“He said it was an honest mistake.” Scott kicks at the porch, sending little vibrations across the wood that shake up into Stiles’ shoes. “Just got caught up in the moment and made a stupid bet against Hoshtek. He apologized.”

Stiles takes a seat in an ancient rocking chair that creaks ominously under his weight. “Did you tell him about my idea? Why I came down?”

“No. I don’t trust him not to screw it up. You don’t have to do this, Stiles. I’ve got the gist of the idea, I can take it from here. You’re supposed to be working for your judge again this summer.”

“Resaca can survive without me,” Stiles says drily. “You, I’m not so sure.”

“I’d be insulted if you weren’t trying to put yourself in harm’s way to help me.”

“You’re the one who’s going to be climbing in the ring,” Stiles reasons. “I’ll just be the one antagonizing the guy with a habit of shooting people he doesn’t like with a javelina-hunting rifle into betting the land he lucked into three weeks ago.”

“‘Lucked into,’ my ass,” Scott growls. Two curses from Scott in one day. Things are getting serious. “The match my dad bet on was fixed. I’m sure of it.”

“I’m not going to pretend I know anything about boxing. But Hoshtek – that’s his game? Fixing matches?”

“Blackmail, coercion, extortion,” Scott confirms. He straightens up and stretches his hands up over his head, wincing. Stiles feels a pang of sympathy. If he’s feeling the impact of last night, Scott’s got to be having a worse time of it. “I think he might be into moving drugs, too. I’m not sure; my grandma kept me pretty sheltered when I was here.”

“Hmm,” Stiles muses. “I wonder if we could get him for the drug thing, too. Actually get him put away, instead of just getting your ranch back. I’ll call my dad in the morning and see if he has any contacts in the sheriff’s department down here.”

“You’re going to get us both killed, aren’t you?”

“Go big or go home,” Stiles says. “Just do it. Other sports-related platitudes. Hey, what happens when you win?”

Scott sits in the rocking chair next to Stiles. “What?”

“Say I get Hoshtek to bet, you win the match, you get the deeds to the ranch back. What then? Take your dad to court and get control of the property? Still sell to Gutierrez? What’s the endgame?”

Scott sips at his tea while he thinks. “I probably should have expected this, but being back here – I’m not sure I want to sell anymore. I think this place is embedded in my soul or something. That sounds stupid.”

“No, it really doesn’t,” Stiles replies, thinking about the kitchen in his dad’s house and how he and his parents used to make dinner and sing John Denver together. “So you’re going to move back here after law school and run things?”
“No way,” Scott says quickly. “Don’t get me wrong, I love it here and my heart will probably always be here, but I don’t want to actually live here. You and me, DC – that’s still the dream. My dad…he said that he came back when he heard about Grandma because he wanted to keep the place running.”

Stiles chokes on an ice cube. “You’d trust him with that?”

“Of course not,” Scott says, looking offended. “Not right away, not for a long time. Mateo, the foreman – I’d trust him. But he’s, you know…” Scott trails off, gesturing circles with his hands and pointing over his shoulder.

Stiles raises an eyebrow. “He’s been working on the railroad? Hitchhiking? Making pizza?”

“No, lunatic. He’s an illegal immigrant. I can’t make him the legal guardian of the ranch if he’s undocumented.”

Stiles hums. “What if that wasn’t an issue? What if I could get him documents?”

Scott squints at him. “What would a sheriff’s son know about that?”

Stiles looks out at the hills, pointedly ignoring the gaze he can feel drilling a hole into the side of his head. “A sheriff’s son wouldn’t. A naturally inquisitive young man with a habit of making friends of questionable repute while drinking at dive bars, however, might.”

“Hah!” Scott blurts. “I knew you and Riley did something shady at O’Rourke’s. You walked around looking over your shoulder for weeks.”

“It was not weeks, and I was not looking over my - you know what, never mind. To repeat the question: if I can get Mateo turned into, for all intents and purposes, a legal US citizen, what do you want to do?”

“Keep the ranch,” Scott replies firmly. “Keep it in my name, make Mateo the custodian while I’m in law school. My dad can stay here and work until he proves that he’s actually changed, or until he flakes out again.”

“And if he flakes again?”

Scott takes a long drink. “He lost it after my mom died. I can’t blame him for grieving, but I was eight and I needed him. My life actually got better when he left. I can’t say I wouldn’t be disappointed if he takes off again, but I’m not making him a Number One Dad mug anytime soon.”

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It does not go smoothly.

First of all, Riley’s the one with the contact information for the guy Stiles thinks can help with Mateo’s documentation, and Riley has evidently extended his post-L1 celebratory revelry to last the whole week. When Stiles finally gets in touch with the guy – who actually turns out to be a girl – she demands an exorbitant fee and gets pissed when Stiles tries to haggle her down. Then the first round of papers come through without a Social Security Number, and when Stiles, irate, sends them back, he gets redirected to another guy – actually a guy this time – who asks a lot of questions.
that Stiles doesn’t want to answer.

Inserting Scott back into the seedy underbelly of backcountry Texas boxing (apparently a real thing, not just a plot device on procedural cop shows) also proves trickier than expected. It’s a tightly-knit, closely-guarded society, and even though this is where Scott originally learned to box, he’s been living in California for five years and is viewed as an outsider now. It takes all of June and the better part of July for him to work his way in, and then all the rest of July to set up the pairing he needs for the bet with Hoshtek.

The drugs thing is, comparatively, simple. Scott and Stiles are no geniuses, but Hosktek’s operating at least twenty IQ points below either of them and it’s not hard to pin down the routes he uses to move raw opium. By the end of July, Stiles probably knows more about Hoshtek’s business than he does, and it’ll be a simple matter of handing a file with delivery dates and times to the local sheriff’s department.

So this is how Stiles spends two months of his life in rural Texas. Like Scott said, every day is the same. Up at five, breakfast, report to Mateo for some job that’s mind-numbing and exhausting and adds to his collection of wicked calluses. Lunch in the field, more work. Dinner with the crew (a noisy, raucous affair that Stiles grows to love), then a couple hours of Scott ingratiating himself with the community while Stiles makes increasingly hostile phone calls to California. All the while, Rafael McCall plays the model citizen and repentant father, which irritates Scott and breeds distrust in Stiles.

Stiles does actually come to understand why Scott’s so deeply rooted to this place, though. It has a way of working itself into all your nooks and crannies. Not in a dirty way – unless you’re talking about the actual, literal dirty way, because Stiles has dirt crusted under his fingernails and in all the creases of his skin that he’s pretty sure will be there for the rest of time.

God, he needs to get more sleep.

But yes, he understands what it is to be a part of this place. He’s also become deeply, painfully aware of how bored he would be if this was his whole life. To quell some of the boredom, he starts trying to predict who’s going to win the next presidential election, a throw-back to the But why? game his mom had always insisted on playing. They’re two years out from the election, which makes it perfect timing: no one’s officially declared candidacy (except Ron Paul, bless his heart), but everyone’s posturing and jockeying for publicity. Stiles winds up plastering a wall of his temporary bedroom with newspaper clippings, excerpts of speeches, maps of the swing states with historical polling data, and while Scott is out boxing, Stiles is here: sitting alone in front of a wall, talking himself through every potential candidate, and arriving at a single conclusion.

“Talia Hale,” he says one morning in early August, walking into the kitchen where a half-asleep Scott is making coffee.

“Who?”

“Senator Talia Hale, from Louisiana. She’s going to be the next President of the United States.”

“Okay, great,” Scott yawns. “My match with Hoshtek’s guy is this Friday.”

Stiles blinks. “Oh. Shit. Are you going to be ready?”

Scott inserts his mug directly into the trickle of coffee from the machine. “I have to be. If I don’t show up, I forfeit. Plus, we’re supposed to be back at Stanford in two weeks.”
“I just don’t want you to get your head smashed in by some crazy guy all jacked up on opiates. Which, considering who we’re dealing with, is a real concern.”

Scott just shakes his head, smiling, and drinks his coffee. A few seconds later: “Wait, Talia Hale? What about Talbot? I like Talbot.”

***

Watching Scott box in strictly controlled, university-sanctioned matches while wearing Stanford colors is, Stiles learns, rather a different experience than watching Scott box in a poorly lit bar basement with dozens of drunk jackasses sweating everywhere. But Hoshtek makes the bet and Scott wins, and Stiles doesn’t even really mind when he gets a pool cue upside the head in the chaotic brawl that breaks out immediately following the upset.

“You don’t mind because you have a concussion,” Scott says, looping Stiles’ arm more firmly around his neck as they weave their way back to the truck with as much haste as either can manage. Scott’s nose has been bleeding for at least ten minutes and his left eye is swelling alarmingly quickly, but he’s grinning wider than he has all summer. “I’m going to have to teach you to fight, that was just embarrassing.”

“I’m becoming a lawyer so I can fight with my words, Scottie” Stiles says, letting Scott tuck him into the passenger seat. “And I feel perfectly fine.”

“You were unconscious for three seconds and you’re slurring worse than when you’re drunk,” Scott says bluntly. “I’m a boxer, I know concussions. Are you going to puke?”

“No! Yes. Maybe.”

Scott just laughs and shifts gears. “Well, let me know so I can pull over. God, Stiles, can you believe it? I won.”

“We should take the opium file to the sheriff in the morning,” Stiles says, prodding at the back of his head. “Ow.”

“Stop poking. We’ll go to the sheriff right after I take you to a doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor. I’m dizzy. Okay, maybe a doctor.”

Scott looks over at him for as long as he can without veering off the road. “Stiles, thank you. I know we’re best friends, I know we’re basically brothers, but you didn’t have to do this and I don’t think I could have done it without you. Thank you.”

Stiles offers a crooked grin. “With you ‘til the end of the line, right?”

Scott grins back. “Absolutely.”

Chapter End Notes
Oh, young Scott and Stiles. There's so much I need to warn you about, and yet, tragically, I cannot.

All chapter titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.
we found wonderland (you and i got lost in it)

Chapter Summary

“Obviously,” Peter says, sounding bored. “You’re smart, Stiles, but you’re a lawyer. You weren’t trained for this. As I told you, you’re predictable. I can help with that.”

Kate walks into the foreground, holding a rifle aimed at Scott’s head. Every muscle in Stiles’ body seizes up, and he and Scott are close enough that he can feel Scott’s mirrored response.

“No, seeing your best friend killed in front of you is an extreme external stimulant, I’ll grant you that,” Peter says. “But seeing Mr. McCall shot did wonders for your efficiency last time, didn’t it?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“Scott,” Stiles says as they crouch outside the warehouse, waiting for Kira’s signal to move. “If this gets us both killed, I just think you should know – I slept with Becky McKinstrie sophomore year.”

“Asshole!” Scott whispers, smacking Stiles in the chest with the back of his hand. “You knew I liked her!”

“Dude, your game is ridiculously slow. Painfully slow. Are you ever going to actually propose to Allison, or are you just going to keep leaving brochures for things like hot air balloon honeymoons on my desk?”

“That was just an idea.”

“Or was it your way of telling me that you’re finally ready to take our friendship to the next level? Because you’ve got really nice arms, Scottie, and very soulful eyes.”


“Derek and Daniel are pulling up,” Kira says through the comms. “Erica and Boyd set for 11:48.”

A scream echoes from inside the warehouse. Scott and Stiles look at each other and make the same decision.

Everything goes wrong. Immediately.

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“You’re late,” Lydia growls as Derek jogs up. “Stiles and the others are already in place.”

“Had to wait for Lahey’s kids to go to bed,” Derek explains. Daniel, Lahey, and Parrish join them at the side of Stiles’ Jeep, where Lydia and Kira’s faces are eerily illuminated by the glow from Kira’s many electronic devices.

“My apologies, ma’am,” Lahey says, smiling and extending a hand into the cab. “Camden Lahey. My daughter’s teething.”

“How wonderful for you,” Lydia deadpans, ignoring the proffered palm. “Call me ‘ma’am’ again and I’ll garrote you in your sleep.”

“I’d believe her, Cam,” Parrish says. He grins brightly and jostles Lahey’s shoulder. “That’s Lydia Martin.”

Lydia gives him a slow once-over. “And you are?”

“Jordan Parrish, Miss Martin,” Parrish says, offering his hand, which Lydia, after a moment, takes. “I saw you in court last summer. The time you made opposing counsel cry.”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Lydia sniffs, tossing her hair.

“Focus, men,” Daniel snaps, and both Parrish and Lahey drop their smiles and turn to him instantly. Derek didn’t really have doubts about them before – if Daniel trusts them, Derek trusts them, and they’d both agreed to the night’s extracurricular activities without asking questions beyond the information they needed to know to get the job done. In the car on the drive out, they’d lapsed into the easy banter of well-acquainted brothers-in-arms, something that felt comfortable and set Derek’s mind at ease. Now, watching them respond to Daniel’s command without hesitation, Derek is starting to feel optimistic about their chances for the first time.

“Any questions before the party starts?” Daniel asks, and Derek cinches the buckle of his bulletproof vest a little tighter. He wishes they’d been on time, would have been able to give the others vests as well – but it’s too late to think about that now. He knows the plan, he knows his role: stay behind the other three until they find Cora, then get Cora out. Erica and Boyd are causing a distraction, Stiles and Scott are looking for Kate and Peter, Isaac’s planting a bomb that will hopefully make the whole thing look like a gas leak-turned-explosion.

A hail of gunfire sounds two blocks to their north, from the direction of the warehouse, and Derek’s heartbeat spikes as he checks his watch and hears his thoughts echoed by Kira, both in person and in the comm unit flaring to life in his ear.


***

“So this is your A-team, Stiles?” Peter laughs, as two more of B6-13 agents drag a groaning Boyd into the room and drop him on the floor next to Erica, who’s bleeding from a bullet wound to the leg. “You, the idiot I shot a few months ago, and two members of my sister’s detail? Should I assume the red-headed brainiac and the computer geek are somewhere nearby?”
“Crap,” Kira breathes in Stiles’ ear. “Crap, crap, crap – how did that go wrong so fast?”

“Be helpful or be quiet, Kira,” Lydia snaps. “Daniel and Derek and the others are on their way.”

“You knew we were coming,” Stiles says, his knees already aching from kneeling on the concrete floor. There’s also a lancing pain radiating out from his right side, where he thinks he ran into a door jamb trying to get away when Peter’s agents started pouring out of the walls and shooting at anything that moved. Behind Peter’s shoulder, Cora shrieks into her gag and struggles against the hands of the agents holding her.

“Obviously,” Peter says, sounding bored. “You’re smart, Stiles, but you’re a lawyer. You weren’t trained for this. As I told you, you’re predictable. I can help with that.”

Kate walks into the foreground, holding a rifle aimed at Scott’s head. Every muscle in Stiles’ body seizes up, and he and Scott are close enough that he can feel Scott’s mirrored response.

“Now, seeing your best friend killed in front of you is an extreme external stimulant, I’ll grant you that,” Peter says. “But seeing Mr. McCall shot did wonders for your efficiency last time, didn’t it?”

There’s a small explosion overhead that fills the room with a fine cloud of smoke, and Stiles just has time to think, But Isaac’s supposed to be in the basement, before the dust settles and he sees Allison – Allison? – standing protectively in front of Scott, holding a loaded compound bow – a compound bow? – pointed at Kate’s chest.

“Allison?” Kate says incredulously, clearly just as shocked by this turn of events as Stiles. As everyone, actually, since Kira and Lydia both shriek Allison?! in his ear.

“Fascinating,” Peter says quietly, watching this unfold in front of him like a particularly well-acted play.

“One wrong move, and I will pin your heart to your ribcage,” Allison says calmly.

Kate throws her head back and laughs. “I bet you don’t even know how to use that thing. You’re a fucking cook!” She hits the ground, writhing, half a second later with an arrow protruding from mid-thigh. She screams loudly enough that it makes Stiles’ comm crackle in offense.

Allison nocks another arrow and stares down at her aunt impassively. “I’m a two-star Michelin chef, actually.”

Action-heroine-esque though the moment may have been, it doesn’t last long. They’re still overwhelmingly outnumbered, and three agents – one of whom is Malia, Stiles notes with distaste – strip Allison’s bow out of her hands and force her to her knees.

“I don’t know much about you, littlest Argent,” Peter says, watching Allison curiously and completely ignoring Kate’s continued moans of pain. “But you’re promising. Perhaps I’ll keep you.”

Allison manages a string of swearwords that make Scott blush before they force a rough gag in her mouth. Scott gets the same treatment, and then it’s just Stiles and Peter. In a room full of heavily armed B6-13 agents. With two nearly unconscious members of the Secret Service, a pregnant woman, and Scott and Allison.

Honestly, fuck his life.

“Derek and the others are in position, Stiles, but I don’t know what they can do,” Lydia frets.
“There’s no way to get you all out of there.”

Peter cocks his head and smiles at Stiles, that twinkle in his eye that makes Stiles’ stomach clench in on itself. “I have a better idea. You’re going to choose. I’ll kill your best friend, or your best friend’s beloved. It’s up to you.”

“Don’t I get the third option?” Stiles says, desperately trying to ignore the part of his brain that’s running simulations of Scott’s reaction to Allison’s death. “You gave my mother the third option. Kill me instead.”

Scott makes a strangled sound, but Peter just chuckles. “The problem, Stiles, is that I like you. Do you know, I wanted you for B6-13 from the first day we met?” Peter asks conversationally. “I called your mother – not that I knew she was your mother then – from the campaign and said, ‘Przemyslaw Stilinski. He’d make an excellent agent,’ and she blocked me for months before I figured it out. She actually pretended she didn’t recognize the name, if you can believe that.”

Stiles shifts against the concrete again. “Well, if you called me that, she probably legitimately didn’t know who you were talking about. That’s not my name.”

Peter waves his hand dismissively, and no one should ever move that carelessly when holding a handgun. “I know, you had your first name legally changed to Stiles after college. All your original records still exist, obviously. I’d expect you to know that, given that you’ve procured new identities for clients in the past.”

“No,” Stiles says slowly, starting to feel like there’s some significance in what’s unfolding that he doesn’t quite understand. “I know how name changes work – but I’m telling you that Sheh-may-sway,” he continues, fumbling over the unfamiliar pronunciation, “wasn’t my original legal name.”

“This is irrelevant,” Peter says. “But I’ve seen your birth certificate.”

“So have I,” Stiles insists. “And my name wasn’t Sheh-may – Shah-me – whatever, my name was Grzegorz. My mother insisted on it, even though the Polish comes from my dad’s side of the family. Grzegorz, the vigilant watchman. I had a bitch of a time learning to spell that in kindergarten.”

There are a few beats of silence, then Erica says, “Well, that’s going to make this interesting,” from her spot on the ground a few yards away.

“Stiles,” Lydia says. “Derek says Grzegorz is the name of a top-ranking Air Force protective protocol.” Stiles love and hates that Lydia doesn’t even stumble over the pronunciation.

“Same for us,” Erica chimes in. She’s now propped up her elbows, looking pale from blood loss but absolut gleeful. “Got it in both the Rangers and the Secret Service.”

“Grzegorz,” Isaac confirms, stepping out of the shadows. “High-value asset. Protect above all other directives.”

Bomb’s planted,” Kira whispers. “Isaac came up when he finished setting it. Remote detonator.”

Peter shuts down his look of surprise. “Unexpected, but still irrelevant,” he says. “Malia, shoot him.”

The sharp double-clack of a bullet being chambered behind his head makes Stiles’ neck break out in a cold sweat, but he can hear the uncertainty in Malia’s voice when she says, “Shoot…Stiles? Grzegorz?”
There’s a definite shift in the air when Malia hesitates.

This is officially more times than Stiles has ever heard his name correctly pronounced in his entire life.

“You didn’t actually go through training, did you?” Isaac asks Peter, standing completely still save the knife spinning around his fingers. “You didn’t learn the directives the way the rest of us did.”

It takes Stiles a second to piece together that when Isaac says “us,” he’s talking about all the B6-13 agents in the room. Who are now looking at each other, at Peter, at Stiles, at Isaac, unclear on what to do.

“Fine,” Peter snarls, notching his safety down. “If none of you will shoot him, I’ll do it myself –.”

The instant Peter brings his gun to Stiles’ forehead, every single other weapon in the room points at him. Stiles can even see the barrel of Malia’s, hovering just over his shoulder.

“See?” Erica says, letting her elbows go out from under her. “Interesting.”

Stiles slowly pushes himself to his feet, aware of the way guns shift around him to stay trained on Peter. He brings up a hand and grips Peter’s wrist, twisting until Peter’s gun is pointing harmlessly toward the ceiling.

“What did you say to me a few weeks ago?” Stiles says, re-homing the safety with his free hand and then twisting sharply until Peter’s grip breaks and the gun clatters to the floor. “That you were building something better?”

“Someone tell me what the hell is going on right now,” Lydia commands.

***

Derek watches Peter’s gun fall from his hand and he wants to cheer. Or possibly collapse from relief. But he keeps watching, wedging himself even more firmly behind the side door where he’s posted, just out of eyeline of the spots where Daniel, Parrish, and Lahey are holed up. He’s so focused on watching Stiles diffuse the situation that he doesn’t notice someone coming up behind him until there’s a cold finger pinching the comm unit out of his ear and a forearm is cutting off his windpipe.

“That went better than I expected,” says a familiar voice, and just when Derek’s starting to get lightheaded the pressure on his throat lessens. Once the dots blink out of his vision, he’s looking at a woman with long auburn hair – and for the first time, his brain connects this woman to the pictures on newspapers to the woman who told him off on a bench outside Stilinski & Associates three years ago.

Claudia Stilinski.

“You built his name as a protective protocol into every branch of the military,” Derek says, rubbing his Adam’s apple. “The Secret Service. B6-13.”

“And several global leaders in private security,” she nods, peeking around the door frame. Stiles is holding a gun on Peter, Isaac is collecting everyone else’s guns, and Scott’s tending to Erica and
Boyd while Allison unties Cora. Derek sees Daniel take a few cautious steps into the room. “A mother’s love, you know.”

Derek watches her carefully. There’s something of Stiles in her – a tilt to the lips, a curve of the jaw. “You weren’t the one who tried to have my mother killed, were you? That was all Peter.”

She turns a piercing gaze on him. “The world needs to continue to think that I was responsible. They need someone to blame, a story to believe.”

“Why not let them blame Peter? Let all of this come to light.”

“No one likes to speak ill of the dead, Derek,” she says, and if Derek were a little less fried, a little more balanced, he’d probably be able to anticipate her next move. As it is, though, he doesn’t react nearly in time to prevent her from grabbing his gun, taking aim, and firing a single shot that tears through Peter’s back and sends him toppling to the floor.

There is definitely, definitely something of Stiles in the way she then turns to Derek, winks, hands back his gun, says, “He’s still too good for you,” and walks confidently away.

"Is his father alive?" Derek calls after her.

She doesn't break stride, but she looks over her shoulder and grins at him. "I don't know. But I'm going to find out."

***

The bullet passes close enough to Stiles that it knicks his pants, and the blood that spatters across him in then next heartbeat is warm. He watches Peter, already glassy-eyed, collapse, and looks up in time to see his mother – of course, of fucking course, press a gun back into Derek’s hands and dart away. He and Derek make eye contact for the briefest second, but the shot drew attention to Derek’s position and Cora runs for him, throwing herself in his arms.

“What do we do after her?”

Stiles startles at the question, startles even more at the fact that it came from Malia, and startles even further at the fact that it seems to be aimed at him.

“Uh,” he says, looking around for help, but every eye in the room is focused on him.

Well, almost every eye. Most of the B6-13 agents have already vanished, including Deucalion – who claps Isaac on the shoulder, whispers something into his ear that leaves Isaac looking shocked, and strolls casually through an open door – and Malia’s actually looking down at her father’s body with clinical disinterest.

“Uh,” he says again. “Do you actually think you’d be able to catch her?”

Malia squints. “No. Probably not. Okay, then. Call if you need me.”

And then Malia’s gone too, taking the remaining agents with her. Stiles feels his next adrenaline-induced drop swooping in, and everything breaks up into little snippets of conversation.
“You were B6-13 this whole time?” Scott asks, pulling the belt he’s securing around Erica’s upper leg tighter.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Allison says, mimicking Scott’s action for Kate. “I’m FBI.”

“But you’re a chef.”

“Can’t I be a chef and FBI?”

“Does this mean we have to call you Agent Argent?” Stiles asks, tentatively pressing a hand to his side, which is still spiraling pain in all directions.

Allison laughs. “Well, technically, I’m an informant. My handler says the appropriate term is ‘asset.’”

Scott looks her in askance. “You have a handler?”

“My dad and I both do,” she says, ignoring Kate’s grunt of pain. “We’ve been helping them build a case against Gerard for abusing Argent Arms’ international arms dealer licensure. I followed Kate here because she's been weird ever since getting back from Brazil.”

In the shocked silence that follows, Scott blurts, “Will you marry me?”

“Oh, that’s why I was so nervous about it,” Allison says, looking over at Kate. “I’ve been worried I’d be pregnant.”

“Not a bad day at the office, huh, Camden?” Jokes Danny’s other friend, Parrish. “Only one casualty, and we got to see an impromptu proposal.”

Camden? Stiles thinks, mouthing the name to Isaac. His fingers feel tacky.

Isaac gives a panicked little nod back, and Stiles is trying to think of a way to casually work Isaac’s name into conversation short of shouting HEY ISAAC when he’s saved by Kira and Lydia flinging themselves into the room.

“Is everyone okay?” Lydia demands, walking briskly to Allison and smacking her on the shoulder. “I’m your best friend. You should have told me you were working with the FBI. Congratulations on your engagement! I assume I’m the maid of honor?”

“Isaac, if we’re not going to use the bomb downstairs, can you help me disarm it?” Kira asks, holding her tablet in front of her like it’s the explosive. “The remote detonator is making me really nervous.”

“Isaac?” Camden repeats, taking a few steps closer. “Sorry, did you say – sorry. I had a brother named Isaac, and you even – you even kind of – kind of look like him.”

“I didn’t kill Dad,” Isaac blurts. “I swear, I didn’t. I wasn’t even in the state, and he always drove when he’d had too much to drink.”

“They sent me the toxicology reports,” Camden says. “I know, he was a drunk bastard even when – Isaac?” Camden takes several quick steps across the room with his arms held out, and Isaac throws himself backwards to avoid the physical contact. Camden freezes, arms still extended, absolutely fucking beaming. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. We can work on that.”
“You’re sure you’re okay?” Derek asks Cora, running his hands over her swollen stomach, the very image of a concerned older brother. It’s cute.

Stiles’ brain is starting to feel fluffy. They’re walking down the road back to their vehicles, and he keeps forgetting which foot is supposed to go in front of the other. Why are the streetlights so bright?

“Well, now that everything’s calm, I should probably tell you that my water broke about half an hour ago,” Cora says. Derek immediately sweeps Cora up into his arms and takes off running for the cars, Daniel jogging somewhat more calmly behind him.

“What a day, huh, bro?” Scott asks, bouncing up next to him. They left most of the others to take care of Erica, Boyd, and Kate, so he and Scott are supposed to drive the cars back and get them. That was the plan. Right?

“And your name being some powerful code word!” Scott crows. He might have been talking this entire time. “Love it. We should – hey, dude? Are you okay? Stiles?”

He wakes up in the hospital to Scott, Lydia, and Allison playing poker on the foot of his bed.

“Erica and Boyd are fine, Cora had a beautiful two-week-early baby girl who’s doing very well,” Scott says, passing him an ice chip.

“Isaac made it look like Peter was killed during a mugging,” Lydia adds. “No one’s seen your mother.”

“You perforated your spleen, and I took the rest of it out because you can’t be trusted with your own organs,” Allen says, and deals him in.

In the end, it takes eighteen days to get everyone up to speed and on the same page.

They can only take it in two-hour chunks late at night, since almost everyone has a day job they can’t miss, but the group gathers like clockwork at 10PM – first in Stiles’ hospital room, then in his apartment when he’s released. The Stilinski & Associates team, which now includes permanent Allison and Jackson attachments, sits closest to the Wonderland Wall. The First Family, now including the newly-minted Theresa Hale-Brooks but notably, terribly minus one Derek Hale, squeezes onto Lydia’s couch. The various protective figures they’ve accumulated – Erica, Boyd, Danny/Daniel, Jordan Parrish, Camden Lahey, Luke, Chen – take turns listening and watching the perimeter. Starbuck makes continuous circles, thrilled to have so many people at her disposal for petting.

Deaton hovers at the back of the room, a knowing smile on his face. Stiles wants to drop a building on his shiny head.

“He’ll come around,” Laura says, when the group is breaking up on day eighteen. “He’s just…he’s not good at…he’s a fucking idiot sometimes.”

“I know,” Stiles says, looking at Theresa’s tiny, perfect fingers wrapped around his own. “I know.”
“Do you think this is a mistake?” Stiles asks, weaving a bit of discarded ribbon into Lydia’s hair as he braids it.

“Having Christmas at your apartment instead of mine, or Scott and Ally’s?” Lydia guesses. “Absolutely. None of your furniture matches, and my kitchen is better.”

“Allison thinks my kitchen is just fine,” Stiles points out, peeking over the back of the couch to where Allison, assisted by Isaac (because Stiles’ life just isn’t strange enough), is happily putting the finishing touches on dinner. “And you helped pick out my furniture.”

“That was years ago, and you added those horrible end tables since then,” Lydia reasons.

“I like my end tables! But no, that’s not what I – I mean everything at work. Sending Kate away, looking for my mom, trusting Malia, trying to figure out B6-13. For that matter, telling you and Scott and Kira anything about B6-13. What if it’s all a mistake? What if I’m putting you in danger?”

“We were in danger already, buddy,” Scott says, flopping on the couch and settling his head on Stiles’ thigh. It disrupts Stiles’ braiding angle, so he smooths out his progress and starts against from the other side of Lydia’s head. “You told us so we’d know what we’re up against. Besides, we’re not supposed to keep secrets from each other.”

“What’s that thing you guys are always saying to each other? With you ‘til the end of the line?” Lydia leans her head into Stiles’ hands. “God, that feels nice. I need to you teach Jackson how to French braid.”

“That is 100%, absolutely, positively, never ever happening,” Stiles says. “And that’s a quote from Captain America, Lyds, I know you’ve seen those movies.”

“Of course I’ve seen them, you sent me texts swooning over Chris Evan’s jawline for weeks until I gave in.”

“A monument like that deserves to be praised.”

“I like Scarlett Johansson,” Scott volunteers.

“Of course you do, pal, she’s a goddess.”

“Back to the point at hand,” Lydia interjects. “Scott already addressed your concern about looping the rest of us in to B6-13, so let’s continue to work backwards. Trying to figure B6-13 out is not a mistake. Once you found out that Isaac’s nightmares aren’t as unfounded as we thought, digging until we get to the bottom of this was a foregone conclusion. Next.”

“Trusting Malia is a risk,” Scott hedges. “But we need information, and she’s the only in we’ve got.”

“Do we actually trust her in the first place?” Lydia asks. Stiles can feel her eyebrow raise through her scalp. “I thought we were just tolerating her presence for the time being. Scott’s right, we need the information and so long as we keep her at arm’s length, it’ll be fine.”
“I like her, though,” Stiles says. He screws up part of Lydia’s hair and carefully undoes his work back to the error. “Most of the time. I want to like her.”

“You want to understand her,” Lydia corrects. “She’s different and tricky and you haven’t been able to pin her down yet. This is what you do, Stiles, you collect people and analyze them and break them down to their component parts until they makes sense, then you piece them back together in a way that’s useful to you.”

“That makes me sound like a really creepy and manipulative person,” Stiles protests. “Give me an example of someone I’ve done that to.”

Scott and Lydia both raise a hand. “I could also read you our entire client list, if that would help,” Scott offers.

“You’re both terrible. Point taken.”

“I joined the conversation late, but looking for your mom was next, right?” Scott says. “Not a mistake. On no planet is that a mistake. She’s your mom. I only met her the one time at freshman year move-in, but you talked about her all the time and given how you were after she died…”

“But she didn’t die,” Stiles says, surprised at the harshness in her voice. “She let me and my dad think she died, and she drug it out with that week in the hospital. What was the point of that? Now I find out that she’s been alive all this time, that she’s known about me, that she’s the queen of these super secret government spies. Turns out, the woman who raised me and told me she’d love me forever and a day wasn’t at all the person I thought she was. So why am I looking for her?”

“You’ll hate me for saying this,” Lydia says, “but it’s another foregone conclusion. She’s your mother, Stiles. Regardless of everything else she’s done, she’s still your mother, and apparently she’s wrapped up in all the B6-13 insanity. Looking into B6-13 might as well be synonymous with looking for your mother, and vice versa.”

“Do you think it’s possible,” Scott begins, stops, and starts again. “I know it’s a long shot and that I’m probably crazy for even thinking it. But do you think it’s at all possible that maybe my mom is alive, too?”

Stiles’ heart breaks for Scott so forcibly in that instant that he’s surprised he manages to prevent himself from making a sound like a wounded animal. He hadn’t even considered what this must be like for Scott. Stiles gets his mother back from the dead, even if it’s in fucked up, confusing, awful circumstances, but Scott – who lost his mother even younger and didn’t have a dad around to take care of him, who loved his grandmother completely but still has a self-imposed communication blackout on the anniversary of his mother’s death – Scott is still parent-less, save a recovering alcoholic who lives in Texas on the family ranch.

Stiles rubs his fingers against Lydia’s scalp, willing her to understand what he’s thinking. This can’t come from him.

“It’s…unlikely,” Lydia says mildly after a few seconds. “We won’t know for sure until we have a complete list of all of B6-13’s assets, I suppose. But Scott – you know that we’ve looked into your mom’s death, just like we looked into my dad’s. Her cancer was slow and progressive, it took years for her to…it’s not likely.”

“But it’s possible.” Scott picks at the seam of Stiles’ couch cushion until Lydia settles a hand over his. Stiles threads the fingers of his free hand into Scott’s hair and wonders how they got here.
“Don’t do this to yourself, Scott,” he says quietly.

Scott coughs back something that could have turned into something else. “Yeah. You’re both right. I was just…thinking.”

On the other side of the room, Kira chirrups with delight, having successfully programmed Stiles’ Christmas tree lights to flash in time with *Holly Jolly Christmas*.

“Okay, last point,” Stiles says, shaking himself out of the moment. “Sending Kate away. Go.”

“Are you doubting if it was the right thing to do for the republic, or for your personal life?” Lydia asks. Stiles can hear the poorly-disguised smirk in her voice. “Because you already know that we support keeping Kate in the spotlight as the shooter until we have enough evidence to prove B6-13’s existence and culpability as it benefits the country at large.”

Stiles extends his hand forward over Lydia’s shoulder and waits for her to give him a hair tie.

“You guys didn’t see Derek’s face after the Kate thing hit the press. He thinks the entire thing is his fault. He blames himself for putting his family in danger, for me getting shot.”

“And when he finds out that it’s not the truth…” Scott prompts.

“He’ll probably hate me forever,” Stiles sighs, snapping the elastic around the end of Lydia’s braid. “Whenever we’re hanging out and it pops up on the news or he overhears someone say that she’s still missing, he goes into this complete other headspace for a few minutes. It’s awful.”

She twists around so she’s facing him and rests her chin on his knee. “He’s done some things to you that messed with your head pretty badly, too.”

“Two wrongs don’t make a right,” Scott cautions.

“And spouting childhood platitudes doesn’t help anyone,” Lydia retorts. “Would you make a different choice, if you could go back and do it again?”

Stiles tips his head back against the couch, thinking in so many directions at once that it’s hard to see straight. “If we’d proved Kate’s innocence, B6-13 would have pinned it on someone else. Someone we wouldn’t have known, and probably wouldn’t have been able to help. At least we know Kate’s safe, and we have time to figure out what our next step should be.”

He feels both Lydia and Scott nod approvingly.

“You and Derek are going to have a lot to talk about when all of this is over,” Scott says. “You’re going to have to explain the choices you made, even the ones you’re not sure of.”

“And if he doesn’t forgive me? What if I explain everything, and he understands, and he still doesn’t forgive me?”

Lydia sighs heavily. “I’m going to have to have the same talk with Jackson some day, just like Scott will with Allison.”

Stiles blinks and brings his head back down so he’s looking at both of them. “But they’re both in love with you. And you’re in love with them. Me and Derek are just…me and Derek. We’re friends. Not even that, sometimes.”

Lydia reaches up to pat him on the cheek. “Sweetie. Who do you think you’re fooling?”
“You’re a crappy liar,” Scott grins.

“I’m an excellent liar,” Stiles responds, remembering a very similar exchange in their trashed Palo Alto apartment some six and a half years earlier. “You just know me too well.”

Chapter End Notes

All chapter titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.
flashing lights and we took a wrong turn and we fell down a rabbit hole

Chapter Summary

“You’re disgustingly cute when you’re like this,” Laura says matter-of-factly from the kitchen, nearly giving Derek a heart attack.

“Are you going to be like this all the time now?” Cora asks, tilting her head. Theresa, mostly asleep on Cora’s shoulder, blows a spit bubble.

“What are you guys even doing here?” Derek complains, still too floaty to be actually annoyed. He shakes out of his coat and pulls his cell phone from the pocket, smiling again when he sees the Goodnight, boyfriend text from Stiles.

“We’re your sisters, we’re contractually obligated to be nosy about your personal life,” Laura explains, passing him a bowl of popcorn. “Come on, we filled your DVR with episodes of Say Yes to the Dress. You can talk or you can watch the show, Grumble.”

Chapter Notes

Lots and lots of time jumps in this one! We’re covering a lot of ground, as it’s the last chapter in the series (whoa).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

Derek really has no idea what’s involved in being a godparent, so he’s up late the night before Theresa Hale-Brooks’ christening, following Wikipedia links that start with the duties of Catholic godparents and somehow end on proper soufflé methodology. He’s debating how annoyed Luke will be if he requests a midnight shopping trip (he doesn’t have the quantity of eggs required) when someone knocks at his door, and he swings it open to find…Stiles.

“Oh,” he says.

“Yeah, oh,” Stiles says, pushing past him into the apartment. “Oh, Stiles was in the hospital for a week and a half and I didn’t visit him. Oh, Stiles has been out of the hospital for two weeks and I still haven’t answered any of his messages. Oh, Stiles and I need to stand in front of a crowd of very important people tomorrow and swear our fealty to an infant and not look like we want to commit co-godpatricide.”

“Should you even be walking around by yourself?” Derek asks, wondering if he should call Scott or someone to come collect Stiles.

“They took out my spleen, Derek, I didn’t have open heart surgery,” Stiles snaps.
“No, you just got shot defending my family,” Derek snaps back, surprised by how quickly his temper is rising. “Again.”

“Yes!” Stiles shouts. “Yes, I got shot. If anyone here has a right to be mad, it’s me – what the hell are you so pissed off about?”

Derek gapes at him for a second, then comes back with, “‘Swear fealty to an infant?’ Do you have any idea what a godparent actually is?”

“Not really, no!” Stiles shouts, and then launches himself at him. Derek barely has the presence of mind to catch him before Stiles slams their lips together, and then everything is Stiles’ fingers in his shirt and knees crowding up against his and the warm, unrelenting pressure of a hand at the back of his head and he thinks yes, yes, this is what I’ve wanted.

Stiles pulls back to take a huge, shuddering breath, then exhales, “You piss me the fuck off, Hale.”

“It’s not October 16th yet,” Derek says dumbly. He can feel nerve endings he didn’t even know existed in the tips of his fingers, and he curls them against the bare skin of Stiles’ back where his shirt has ridden up.

“You’re the one who set that date,” Stiles says, squirming a little when Derek’s fingers hit a particularly sensitive spot, and Derek gets this pleasant kick in the gut because he remembers that spot. He remembers every square inch of Stiles. He memorized him five years ago, in hotel rooms and back hallways. “Plus, I’m pretty sure you said that’s when you were going to ask me out, and I’m not asking you out. I don’t want to go out. I’m pretty sure I don’t want us to leave this apartment for at least a week.”

Stiles takes a quick step back, emotions still flickering over his features too fast for Derek to track.

“’No,’ Derek says emphatically, trying desperately to marshal his thoughts into something remotely resembling order before he ruins this again. “No, that’s not it – I do want this, and I want that, but that’s not enough.”

Derek hates the last three words as soon as they leave his mouth, and he hates that Stiles’ mask of detachment slams into place, and all he can do is scramble to get to Stiles before he can walk out the door and suddenly Derek has Stiles pressed up against the door and fuck, this is not how this is supposed go, and then Stiles is slamming his elbow back into the soft spot between Derek’s ribs and Derek staggers a few steps back, eyes watering.

“Abdominal surgery three weeks ago, you jackass!”

“I’m sorry,” Derek croaks, and weirdly, it’s the sheer impossibility of this moment and the fact that
he can already feel a bruise forming that give him the clarity he needs. Relief floods him in a such a strong wave that he ends up dropping completely to the floor and laughing into his hands.

“Are you…okay?” Stiles asks when the gale of laughter dies down. Derek looks up through still-watery eyes to see Stiles standing over him, his phone in one hand with a thumb hovering indecisively over the screen. “Do you need me to call Laura or someone?”

“No,” Derek says, giddiness still making him a little light-headed as he pushes himself to his feet. “No, I’m good.”

And he cups Stiles’ face in both hands and gently, gently kisses him.

It’s the polar opposite of their kiss from a minute ago. That was all heat and roaming hands and this is chaste, calm, their only points of contact being lips and hands and jawline.

Derek pulls back to see Stiles blinking at him, expression completely unreadable, and he’s weirdly aware that Stiles’ phone-free hand is reflexively and repeatedly clutching the air and opening again.

“Um,” says Stiles.

“I’m in love with you,” Derek says, and once he gets that out, it becomes the easiest thing he’s done in recent memory. “I’m in love with you, and I don’t want things to go back to the way they were before. Not when we were just friends, not when it was just sex. I want to take you on dates and introduce you as my boyfriend and I want us to…to get a house in Virginia with a yard and a porch swing and two and a half kids and you’ve already got the dog, so that’s taken care of, and that’s what I want. Not a few days of sex driven by me being an insensitive jackass and you being a habitual martyr.”

Stiles’ hand finally stops its frantic motions and settles somewhere around Derek’s hip. “That’s nice to hear, Derek, but saying it doesn’t magically make everything better.”

“I know,” Derek says, and he kisses Stiles again because Stiles is here and he isn’t running, and Derek is here and he isn’t running. “I know. We have a lot to talk about, and it’s going to take a long time. But this, you, us – I want this. So just…stay. Please.”

September, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“B6-13’s founding guidelines and charter,” Talia says, dropping the sheaf of paper on Stiles’ desk. “Apparently, they’re actually provisioned for in the hidden articles of the Constitution. Would you like to guess which president signed them into reality?”

“Not really,” Stiles says, sitting up straighter and wincing slightly as the edges of his wound pull. Today’s his first day back in the office – he should have known this was coming. “There are hidden articles of the Constitution?”

“Didn’t you see National Treasure?”

“I have a thing about avoiding Nicholas Cage.”

“Smart man,” she says, taking one of the seats across his desk. “How are things going around
Stiles clears his throat. “All due respect, Madam President, I doubt you came over just to ask how I’m doing.”

“You never were one for beating around the bush,” she says, raising an eyebrow with an amused look on her face. “I have a proposition for you. Two propositions, actually.”

“Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like either of these?” Stiles shuts all his internet tabs – Allison sent him eight different options for Scott’s groom’s cake, and Stiles got lost in a subsequent research spiral related to different types of fondant – and powers his monitor down. “I’m listening.”

“According to the files we found, there are more than sixty active B6-13 agents,” Talia says. “Obviously, we can’t just pretend they don’t exist. I’d like you and your team to track them down.”

“Ah. And then what?”

Talia looks at him appraisingly. “I’ll leave it up to your discretion. If you feel they can successfully reintegrate with society and become contributing citizens, I’ll trust your team to keep an eye on them. If not…fix it.”

Of all the things Stiles has seen and heard over the past months, this probably shouldn’t bother him as much as it does. He swallows hard. “And the second proposition?”

She shifts forward and flips the packet open, paging almost to the end. The header at the top of page 47 reads Dissolution, reassembly, and presidential appointment. Stiles doesn’t have to read much further to get the general idea.

“So after my team and I clean house, you want me to rebuild B6-13. From the ground up. You want me to be Command.”

“I can’t deny that I see the benefits in a small group entrusted with protecting the republic, outside the bounds of the law.”

Stiles flips the packet shut and rubs his hands across his face. “Can I have a few days to think about it?”

September, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

Derek shuts the door of his apartment and leans against it, not even trying to dull the dopey grin that feels permanently locked on his face. His first official date with Stiles – a resounding success. Dinner (at Calistoga, of course), a drive-in showing of Back to the Future, and then they’d wandered the National Mall talking until Chen had to have a word with the local cops to quiet their fears of suspicious loitering. Stiles had even kissed him goodnight at his place, and – and shit, it’s not like Derek doesn’t know that he and Stiles have done things a hell of a lot more intimate than that – that simple kiss, with one of Stiles’ hands resting on Derek’s chest, still has Derek flushed and out of breath.

“You’re disgustingly cute when you’re like this,” Laura says matter-of-factly from the kitchen, nearly giving Derek a heart attack.
“Are you going to be like this all the time now?” Cora asks, tilting her head. Theresa, mostly asleep on Cora’s shoulder, blows a spit bubble.

“What are you guys even doing here?” Derek complains, still too floaty to be actually annoyed. He shakes out of his coat and pulls his cell phone from the pocket, smiling again when he sees the Goodnight, boyfriend text from Stiles.

“We’re your sisters, we’re contractually obligated to be nosy about your personal life,” Laura explains, passing him a bowl of popcorn. “Come on, we filled your DVR with episodes of Say Yes to the Dress. You can talk or you can watch the show, Grumble.”

October, Year One of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“Using the numbers stations to call us in was smart,” Malia says, scooping salsa onto her plate. “But most people know there’s no Command. They won’t come in unless the infrastructure’s reset.”

“That’s actually why I asked you to meet me,” Stiles says, flagging down a waiter and ordering another beer. “I want you to spread the word. I’ve read the bylaws, I know how this works. I’m Command now.”

Malia snorts. “Saying it doesn’t make it true.”

“Of the previous Commands, one of them is dead and the other left the entirety of B6-13’s case files in my office,” Stiles says, smiling when Malia freezes. “Yes, all of them. The hard copies. I cleared out Wonderland’s archives. And I have the presidential seal of approval, which is actually written in to the bylaws as a necessity. Should I go on?”

Malia finishes chewing, swallows, and wipes her hands. “What do you want me to do?”

“Spread the word,” Stiles repeats. “Grzegorz Stilinski is Command. They can come in on their own – Isaac’s setting new meeting locations every six hours via the numbers stations – or my team will hunt them down. It’s up to them. Now go. My next appointment’s here.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re enjoying yourself,” Lydia says in his ear as Malia clears out.

“I’m trying to channel Mal Reynolds,” Stiles says, holding his beer close to his lips so it doesn’t look too much like he’s talking to himself. “How am I doing?”

"Scott says that half of writing history is hiding the truth, which seems oddly poignant for him. For either of you, actually. Stay focused. We need them to actually believe that you intend to run B6-13, business as usual, when all this is done.”

“Ethan, Aiden,” Stiles says when the twins cross into his line of vision and slide into the booth across from him. “So good of you to stop by.”

November, Year Two of Talia Hale’s Second Term
"Stiles!" Derek hisses, closing the door as gently as he can and speed-walking down the hall of the residence wing of the White House. “Stiles, come back.”

“Not now, Derek,” Stiles says distractedly, nearly walking into Erica since he’s furiously responding to some message on his phone. Erica, on duty, spares Derek a split-second sympathetic look before reverting to her Secret Service demeanor.

“Stiles, you can’t walk out on a Thanksgiving dinner that includes three heads of state and the Secretary of Defense.”

“George Geraldo hates me already,” Stiles says, still not looking up. “Me leaving will just give him something to be thankful for. It’s a holiday miracle.”

Derek mentally wills the vein in his forehead not to burst. He catches up with Stiles, grabs him by the elbow, and pushes them both through a side door into one of the guest bedrooms.

“What the hell, Derek?” Stiles exclaims, twisting roughly out of his grasp. “Look, I politely excused myself, and I’ll apologize to your mother later, but a work thing came up.”

“A Stilinski & Associates thing, or a B6-13 thing?” Derek jabs. He doesn’t miss the way Stiles’ face flashes through surprise, realization, and anger before settling on determined. Then it’s Stiles’ turn to grab him by the elbow, and Derek drags his feet just a little out of spite on the way to the en suite bathroom.

Stiles closes and locks the door, then clambers around Derek octopus-like to turn on the sink and the shower full-force. He dials someone on his phone and holds it between his ear and shoulder while he even levers the lid off the tank of the toilet and disconnects the stopper so it starts running continuously.

“Braeden?” Stiles says into the phone, wiping his hands on a towel. “It’s me. Alpha seven twelve, Poughkeepsie and Longfellow. I need you to do that thing with my phone – disrupt anything in a ten-foot radius for the next five minutes.”

“Stiles, what –?” Derek starts, but Stiles gives a very finely-executed gesture indicating just where Derek can stick his protest.

“Good. Standby.” Stiles sets his phone on the counter next to the sink and rounds on Derek, glaring furiously. “Whatever you think you know, you’re wrong.”

“Am I?” Derek asks, looking pointedly at the phone. “Because that didn’t sound like a call a man makes when he has nothing to hide. Who the hell is Braeden?”

“I couldn’t exactly call Isaac for this,” Stiles snaps, knocking the lid of the toilet down and sitting on it. “He’s spending the day with Camden’s family. It’s his first actual family holiday in, you know, forever.”

Derek recognizes the deflection. “That’s not really the important part of this, is it, Stiles?”

Stiles tugs on the knot of his tie to loosen it. “It’s just a work thing, Derek. It’s urgent and I need to take care of it, but it’s nothing to worry about. You’re freaking out over nothing.”

“Don’t do that,” Derek says, shaking his head. “Don’t try to convince me that I’m seeing things that aren’t there, or that I’m making things up, or that I’m paranoid after what happened with Peter,
or any of the other ways you’ve gotten out of talking about this before.”

“We agreed that you can’t know everything about my job,” Stiles says wearily, and for a moment he looks so run-down and small that Derek wants to forget about the whole argument. God knows they’ve put each other through enough over the past years, and Stiles is right, they did agree back in September that the nature of Stilinski & Associates meant that there would be some things Stiles couldn’t discuss.

But that was before Stiles started taking calls at all hours of the night from people who are definitely not part of the S&A team. Before Stiles started carrying two phones – one of which he thinks Derek doesn’t know about. Before Malia started making cameos, before Stiles installed a biometric lock on his guest room, before, before, before – it was either cheating or B6-13, really.

“Job-s,” Derek says, drawing out the “s” sound. He leans heavily against the door, letting his head thunk into the frame. “Multiple jobs. I’m right, aren’t I? I know you can’t actually tell me. But I’m right.”

He thinks he might have preferred the cheating.

“It’s not what you think,” Stiles says, looking up at him. “I know that’s the dumbest, most ineffectual thing I could say right now. But I promise, it’s not what you think. Not the way you’re thinking it, anyway.”

“I want to believe you,” Derek sighs. “We knew going into this that trusting each other was going to be the hardest part, for both of us. How am I supposed to trust you when you’re…you’re Command, aren’t you?”

“It’ll be over soon,” Stiles says, still avoiding given direct answers. He stands and takes the few steps to Derek, linking their fingers and leaning their foreheads together. “I swear, Derek. I have a plan, and it’ll all be over soon.”

“What you’re doing, the world you’re in,” Derek says. “It’s dangerous.”

Stiles lets out a little laugh, his breath ghosting across Derek’s face. “Yes. It is. But it’s necessary. And right. I’m not sure if it’s good yet, but…I’m working on that part.”

“What?” Derek feels like he missed something, like there’s significance behind Stiles’ words he doesn’t understand.

“Nothing. It’s just something I said to Isaac once. It’s a long story.”

Derek looks down at their entwined fingers. “Will you ever tell it to me?”

Stiles kisses him fiercely, desperately, one hand tight in his own and the other on the back of his neck. “When it’s over,” he says in between, when they’re both fighting for air, “I will tell you every last detail that won’t get either of us thrown in a federal penitentiary until we’re 75. But I need you to be patient, Derek. I need you to be patient and to have a little faith in me. And right now, I need you to let me walk out of this room and do my job, and when I come to your apartment later tonight, I need you to not ask me about my day.”

“You piss me the fuck off, Stilinski,” Derek says.

Stiles offers him a small smile and kisses him once more, softly this time. “It won’t be like this forever.”
“How long will it be? If you had to ballpark.”

“If I had an impatient boyfriend who knew far more about my hypothetical second job than he should?”

“Don’t,” Derek warns. “It’s not a joke.”

Stiles’ face drops. “I know. I’m sorry. If I had to ballpark…four months? Six, tops. Maybe eight, but we’re making good progress.”

January, Year Two of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“Okay, so, what is that code?” Stiles asks, rolling over and snatching the phone away from him. “0617. It’s not the birthday of anyone close to you, it doesn’t spell anything on an old, non-QWERTY phone keypad. You’re not the sort of guy to use some random set of numbers. So what is it?”

Derek flushes such a deep shade that Stiles is almost tempted to make a Violet Beauregarde joke. He mumbles something into his pillow.

Stiles winds his fingers into Derek’s hair and uses his grip to lift his entire head away from the bed. “Beg pardon?”

Derek bats his hand away, falls face-first into the pillow, and flips himself over so he’s lying on his back. He keeps his eyes shut and talks at the ceiling, shivering every few seconds as Stiles’ fingers reacquaint themselves with Derek’s chest muscles.

“I have…moments,” Derek begins. “Moments that I know I’ll be able to look back on when I’m eighty and say, you know, that’s when it happened. That’s when my life changed.”

Even though Derek isn’t looking, Stiles hides a smile in his shoulder. He has a list of life-changing moments, too, but now isn’t the time to share that.

“June 17th,” Derek continues, screwing his eyes shut even further. “We met. On June 17th. Six years ago.”

“Oh, my god,” Stiles says. “You are the cheesiest cheese to ever cheese in the history of cheese. Maybe in the history of all dairy products, actually. Is it because you spent your first thirty years stifling every romantic bone in your body, and now it all has to come out at once?”

“I hate you,” Derek grumps, throwing himself onto his stomach and burying his head again.

“You luuuuurve me,” Stiles corrects cheerfully. “By the way, Scott and Ally set a date. May 26th. You’re my plus-one. Now, as the best man, it’s my sworn duty to hook up with the maid of honor, who is Lydia, and 24-year-old Stiles’ fantasy –!”

Stiles chokes off laughter when Derek rears up and flops over on top of him, smushing a pillow into his face. The naked wrestling that ensues leads to some very diverting activity, after which Stiles collapses onto Derek’s sweaty chest, breathing heavily, and says, “So I’ve been thinking about setting Danny and Allen up. Thoughts?”
“So this is what you guys have been doing since September,” Derek says, walking a slow circle around Stiles’ guest bedroom, which is now almost completely devoid of furniture and instead covered, floor-to-ceiling, in maps, newspaper clippings, photos, and Post-it notes. A computer monitor on a desk in the corner shows a display of the country, dotted with blinking lights. “This is what my mother asked you to do. Chase down all the B6-13 agents.”

“A lot of them came in voluntarily once word got around that Stiles was in charge,” Scott explains. “Some of them helped us find others. Tracking down the last eight wasn’t easy.” As Derek watches, Scott shifts a pushpin from a detailed map of Belgium to one showing greater New England. “But we got a tip, Stiles and Isaac and Kira flew out to Ghent, and they’re bringing Julia Baccari home in the morning. The B6-13 house is officially clean. Stiles didn’t want you to have to wait another night, not knowing.”

“What happens to them now? The agents?”

“Oh hey, this is the cool part,” Scott grins, sitting at the desk. He clicks on a few of the little dots, and profiles pop up: Liam Dunbar. Philadelphia, PA. University of Pennsylvania. “So there were sixty-four active B6-13 agents, according to the case files Stiles’ mom left for us. Twenty-two of them hadn’t really done anything too terrible, passed our psych evals, and said they just wanted to go back to pre-scary-government-ninja life. They had to agree to have subcutaneous trackers implanted, and they have to check in with us at least once a week for the time being, but Stiles thinks they’ll really be able to make a go of it.”

“Only twenty-two out of sixty-four?” Derek asks. Starbuck trots into the room and promptly stands directly on his feet, nosing her way into his hand.

“Nineteen others are returning to or joining branches of the military,” Scott continues. He closes the map and opens a different file. “Like her, Violet Lawrence. Lydia had to spend two weeks browbeating a couple five-star generals, but they’re mostly getting moved into special units that can use their unique skill sets.”

“Okay,” Derek says slowly. He makes a mental note to try to page through that file later and make sure none of these people are getting slotted into Danny’s squad. “What about the other twenty-three?”

“Well, one’s dead – sorry about that,” Scott adds. “And Stiles’ mom is still missing, but we’ve pretty much written off any chances of finding her unless she decides she wants to be found. And there are five that we’re, uh…keeping.”

Derek chokes out, “Excuse me?”

“Malia, Ethan, Aiden, Deucalion, and Braeden,” Scott rattles, handing Derek a paper file. “Once Deucalion found out that Isaac’s basically been protecting Grzegorz this whole time, he made it his life’s goal to do the same. Braeden’s a little terrifying, but Stiles thinks we can trust her. Ethan and Aiden kind of, uh, imprinted on me. The way Isaac did when we met. And Malia, well… technically, she’s your cousin. And I think she might have a thing for Kira.”

“This is insane,” Derek says. “They were trained to kill. My psychotic uncle and Stiles’ psychotic
mother trained them to kill. How can you trust any of them?”

“We don’t have to trust them,” says a voice from the doorway, and Derek has spent enough time around her now to recognize Lydia’s the-knowledge-level-of-the-plebians-I’m-surrounded-by-depresses-me voice. “We just have to trust Stiles’ judgment. Do you?”

It’s a very loaded question, standing here with two of people Stiles claims as family.

“I think that depends on what happens to the other fifteen,” Derek says slowly. “The last fifteen agents.”

“What do you think happened, Derek?” Lydia asks, exasperated. “William Barrow bombed school buses and started to like it. They couldn’t all be saved.”

April, Year Two of Talia Hale’s Second Term


“It’s the 16th, Stiles,” Derek says, grinning broadly and holding flowers. “I’ve given you plenty of warning. One grand gesture a month, every month.”

“We’ve already been dating for seven months, you idiot,” Stiles laughs. “Asking me out again every four weeks is starting to feel redundant.”

“Who said anything about asking you out this time?” Derek says, placing the flowers in Stiles’ hands and then forcing him to turn around. “See that building?”

“The bank?”

“All but the top floor is a bank,” Derek says. “The top floor is a small FBI holding unit. See the corner window, all the way to the left?”

“Yes, Derek, I see the window,” Stiles says, deflating a little. “You know, this was a lot of build up so we could look at a bank. FBI holding unit. Whatever.”

“Keep looking,” Derek says. He holds up his watch over Stiles’ shoulder, so Stiles can see the seconds ticking down to 4PM. Exactly at the top of the hour, a figure appears in the window Derek’s got him pointed to, and only Derek’s hand firmly on his hip keeps him from collapsing.

“Derek,” Stiles wheezes, his lungs already tightening up. “Derek, is that -?”

“It’s him. It’s your dad.”

Stiles is crying and waving both arms in the air, probably looking like a complete moron, but his dad – his dad – his dad raises a hand and waves back. “How – how?”

“I made a few strategic friendships when I was scouting locations for HaleEnt Beijing, back in February,” Derek says. “Your mom pointed us in the right direction, and Isaac and Kira helped me
get my foot in the door. After that, Scott and Jackson did the legwork to get him extradited. Lydia had to fly over and terrorize a few officials – did you know she spoke Mandarin? – and then Allison and her dad helped get us in touch with the FBI."

“And he’s – he’s – ?”

“Perfectly healthy and should be free to go by the end of the month,” Derek says. “The Argents’ handler is going to deal with the bringing-him-back-from-the-dead paperwork – some guy named Finstock.”

April, Year Two of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“Hey,” Stiles says, poking his head into Derek’s HaleEnt office. “Got a minute?”

“Sure,” Derek responds, surprised but pleased to see him. “We weren’t supposed to have lunch, were we?”

“No, nothing like that.” Stiles walks over to the chairs in front of his desk and sits, bouncing his leg nervously. The movement jostles two thin, standard manila file folders Stiles is holding, and Derek has seen enough of those files around Stiles’ guest bedroom since March that he knows to set his computer to sleep and prepare for something unsettling. “This isn’t an official visit. Just something I need to talk to you about.”

“Okay.” Derek rounds the desk and sits next to Stiles. “What’s in the files?”

“Well, you know how we – my team and I – we’ve been working to declassify some of the hard copies of the B6-13 files my mom left for me?”

Derek nods, unsure where this is going. He’s seen a few of the declassified files after Isaac quietly releases them to a public, but infrequently-visited site. They’re almost always heavily censored, missing key names, dates, and locations.

“Well, I’m still technically Command. Which means I can technically do, you know, whatever the fuck I want, including show whomever the fuck I want to the un-redacted versions. Which is pretty cool, but –.”

“Stiles,” Derek interjects when he sees Stiles’ chest start to rise and fall sporadically. “Breathe. It’s going to be fine. Just talk to me.”

Stiles thrusts both files at him. “Top one first. The pictures of you and me in Cork, Stock, and Barrel from three years ago. The reason you and your mom came to Stilinski & Associates in the first place. That was a B6-13 assignment, ordered by my mother.”

Derek skims his fingers over the pictures and through to the case report, which details delivery of the photos to Alan Deaton and subsequent inaction. “Subsequent inaction – she was never going to have the pictures released?”

Stiles, jittering so hard that Derek is surprised his teeth aren’t clacking together, shakes his head. “Nope. Apparently – and this is the level of ridiculousness to which my daily life has risen – this was her incredibly perverse method of motherly matchmaking. She wanted to push us back together.”
“She told you that herself?”

“In a note delivered with the most recent basket of muffins.”

Derek shuts the file and set it on his desk carefully. “Your family is even more involved in each other’s lives than mine. Hey, speaking of, how are things going with your dad?”

Stiles beams and stops quaking with nerves for a few seconds. “The FBI’s releasing him to me on Friday. He’s going to stay with me for while we figure out what he wants to do next. Have I mentioned that I love you for that?”

“Several times.” Derek kisses Stiles’ knuckles. “File number two. What am I looking at?”

Stiles starts his fidgeting again. “Do you remember Kali? The reporter who shot that video of us on Election Day?”

Derek almost rips the file in half in his haste to get it open. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. B6-13. Actually, your uncle’s first official order as Command. He wanted your mother to get recalled or impeached before she could even really take office. My mom chalks it up to jealousy.”

“More muffin notes?”

“Nope, that’s actually in the report,” Stiles says, leaning over and paging ahead. “Here. Peter and my mom comment on each other’s orders in a lot of the files. If you read the whole backlog, you can see where my mom actually tried to countermand the whole thing – she thought your mom was the best president we could have. Keep flipping, keep flipping. There – it’s also how Kate knew about Kali. Peter got in touch with Kate while she was on the run in South America and started messing with her mind. Told her how I’d disappeared someone once before, how that was what I was going to do to Kate, too. It was only a matter of time before she went full dark-side on us.”

Derek shuts the file, his head buzzing. “That’s a lot of information all at once.”

Stiles gives him a sympathetic look. “I know. But I think it’s the last of the knowledge dumps, the last questions answered.” His face brightens. “Except…” He bolts out of the chair toward the door and sticks his head into the hallway. “Hey, Luke. Where’s Leia?”

Derek stifles a laugh as Luke responds, “If you’re referring to Agent Chen, Mr. Stilinski, only one of us is required to watch Mr. Hale’s office during business hours.”

“All right, fine, you’ll do.” Stiles pulls Luke into the office, then looks him up and down. “Why didn’t you just tell Derek that it was me in the photos from the bar?”

“Excuse me, sir?”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Three years ago, when I called you from Derek’s phone outside Cork, Stock, and Barrel and asked you to come pick up your wasted, delinquent charge. The blackmail photos came out a few months later.”

“And you saw them,” Derek says slowly, standing. “You were there the night my mother showed them to me. You knew it was Stiles. You could’ve told me right then and saved all of us the trouble.”

“Yeah, sure, okay,” Derek says. Almost seven years with the guy, and it’s the first time he’s asked for that.

“You’re both idiots,” Luke blurts. “You’re the longest-running will they/won’t they pool in Secret Service history. We knew what Mr. Stilinski was capable of, we knew the pictures wouldn’t hurt you or your mother even if they were released, and Agent Reyes has five hundred dollars on the two of you getting married by the end of President Hale’s administration. Sir.”

Stiles bursts into convulsive laughter. Derek manages to say, “Thank you, Luke, that will be all,” before he does the same.

April, Year Two of Talia Hale’s First Term (4.0 years ago)

“What do you think about the space?” The real estate agent, Kathleen, asks. “Gorgeous natural light, six individual offices, two conference rooms. The kitchen is small, but serviceable. Great location, with easy access to the Hill and the courts, both of which I imagine are important for a startup law firm.”

“We’re not a law firm,” Stiles corrects automatically, trailing his fingers over the doorframe of an office he can already see himself settling into. “Can you give us a minute? To get a feel for things?”

“Of course,” Kathleen says, heading for the door. “I’ll be right outside. But can I just say, Mr. Stilinski – it’s an honor to meet you. I’ve been in this town a long time, and I can honestly say that you’re the best White House Press Secretary I’ve seen in years.”

Stiles grants her a little smile. “Thanks. But I’m not that anymore, either.”

A slight frown creases her forehead, but she excuses herself as promised.

“Well, team,” Stiles says when the door clicks home against the jamb. “What do we think?”

Isaac already has the nearest network jack pried free from its moorings and is shining a little penlight into the newly-fashioned hole in the wall. He scribbles a few quick things on a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and offers it to Stiles – still no eye contact, still almost no verbalization, and Stiles still finds every room that Isaac’s been in with all the lights turned on, regardless of the time of day. He doesn’t know what happened to Isaac between Election Day and when he showed up in Manhattan, but Stiles is going to make whoever’s responsible pay. He smoothes the piece of paper against his leg, wondering if it’s worth trying to get Isaac to talk to a therapist again, because Stiles’ multiple attempted heart-to-hearts about Isaac’s childhood are clearly not working.

“Fifteen thousand dollars to re-lay the network foundation and run surveillance wiring through the ceiling,” Stiles reads. “Seems reasonable. How soon can you have it done?”

Isaac scrawls $T+7 on the wall directly above his little hole.

“A week from today, awesome,” Stiles sighs. “I’m assuming you’ll do all the work yourself or tell me what you need – I’ll bring the cash tomorrow. Lyds, what’s your take?”
“It’s much better than the property on Kingsbury. I like the exposed brick,” Lydia says, emerging from the bigger of the conference rooms. “And I want the office that’s off the small meeting room – it’s the only one with an Eastern-facing window. It’s filthy, but I expect we’ll pay someone to clean once Isaac finishes reconstruction.”

Stiles gently brushes a thumb across her cheekbone, where the last of her bruises has faded to a virulent yellow-green that even Lydia’s skill with concealer can’t completely hide. Because she’s Lydia Martin and she’s the Merriam-Webster definition of resilient, she leans into his touch instead of flinching.

“We’ll do the cleaning ourselves,” he says, moving a stray piece of hair out of her face. “Me and Scott, anyway. We need to know this place inside and out.”

“Bro cleaning weekend!” Scott grins, bounding back into the hall and holding up his fist for Stiles to bump. “I need Saturday night off, though – I have a date with Allison.”

“You’ve lived in this city for two weeks, and you already have a girlfriend,” Lydia says, fondness tainting the intended exasperation.

“You’ll love Ally,” Scott promises, grabbing Lydia’s hand and pulling her back into the conference room. Stiles pokes his head into the hallway, tells Kathleen that they’ll take it, and that he’ll come to her office in the morning to sign the paperwork. He waits for Isaac to stop doing whatever he’s doing with the existing wires, then nudges him into the conference room too. Scott’s still expounding the many virtues of Allison Argent to a much-bemused Lydia, but he falls quiet when Isaac steps up next to him and all three turn to face Stiles.

There are clear moments for Stiles that he can point to and say, “That’s when my life changed.” Most of these moments aren’t exactly happy memories. Getting outed to the entire senior class. The doctors telling them that his mom is braindead. His decision to make sure that Kali’s video never made it to the public eye. The phone call three months after law school graduation, just “Stiles” and “your dad” and “I’m so sorry.”

This moment, though? Stiles has a feeling that this moment is going to put all the rest of them to shame.

“Okay,” Stiles says, reaching into his bag for the picture and sticking it up on the window. “I hereby declare Stilinski & Associates open and in business. Our first project is Kira Yukimura. Let’s get started.”

May 26, Year Two of Talia Hale’s Second Term

“Excellent wedding, bro,” Stiles says, clinking his glass against Scott’s. “You too, lady bro,” he adds, leaning over to clink with Allison as well.

Allison giggles and snuggles deeper into Scott’s tux jacket, resting her head on her husband’s shoulder. “Thanks, Stiles. You gave a wonderful best man speech.”

“I did, didn’t I? Hey! No throwing M&M’s, Jackson, we had these specially made. Lydia, control your well-groomed gorilla.”
“Play nice,” Lydia chastises, hurrying the last few steps from the reception hall and folding herself onto a blanket. “I checked the forecast inside; the sun should be up any minute.”

“Watching the sun rise over the ocean with all our best friends,” Scott says, beaming around at the small group gathered on the lawn at 6:12AM. “I can’t think of a better way to start our first full day as husband and wife.”

“We can stay until 7,” Allison yawns. “We’ll miss our flight if we’re any later.”

“Of course, wife,” Scott smiles. “You’re so smart, wife.”

Why thank you, husband. Hey, Stiles! If Jackson’s not allowed to throw M&M’s, neither are you.”

“Married for less than twelve hours and it’s already sucked all the fun right out of them,” Stiles grumbles, leaning back against Derek’s chest. “You doing okay, big guy?”

Derek presses a kiss to the side of Stiles’ head. “A little tired. Weirdly, dancing for six straight hours tends to wipe me out.”

“Wuss.” Stiles kisses the underside of Derek’s jaw. “It’s good training for our wedding. I expect you to learn to swing dance. Actually, let’s make the entire wedding party learn to swing dance. Then we can have one of those big choreographed – oh, hey, sorry, you’re freaking out.”

“I’m not,” Derek promises. “It’s just a thing people say, right? ‘At our wedding,’ ‘When we’re married.’”

Stiles squirms around, digging his phone out of his pants pocket, saying, “Yeah, sure, of course. Just a thing people say. Hey, I got a text from my dad.”

“Everything okay?”

Stiles squints at the picture on his screen, then simultaneously groans and bursts out laughing. He shows the picture first to Scott (who smiles and says, “Told you so.”) then offers it over his shoulder to Derek.

“I don’t get it,” Derek says. “Why’s your dad sending you pictures of a slice of wedding cake?”

“He found it at the door of the apartment when he got back,” Stiles says, reclaiming his phone and typing out a response. “Two guesses as to who left it there.”

“Your mom?”

“Yup. Oh, hey, apparently there was a note saying ‘You look just as good in a tux now as you did at our wedding.’ Great. My felon of a mother is flirting with my returned-from-the-dead father via cake that she apparently stole from my best friend’s wedding. God, my life is weird.”

Everyone gradually falls silent over the next few minutes as sunlight starts to creep over the horizon. Dark blue and rosy pink paint their little group: Scott and Allison, Lydia and Jackson, Erica and Boyd, Isaac, Kira, Danny and Allen, Laura, Cora and Sean, Stiles and Derek.

Derek lightly touches the ring he’s been carrying in his pocket for weeks and thinks, Life is a storm.

Chapter End Notes
Boom.

Thank you to everyone. Your comments, kudos, tumblr messages, emails - you're all incredible, and I'm so, so thankful for every single one of you. Writing this has been a roller coaster of an experience for me, and thank you all so very, very much for riding along.

All chapter titles in this fic are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.

End Notes

I'M BACK for the third and final installment of Stilinski & Associates. Updates happen every Monday/Wednesday/Friday, and we're prrrrrobably looking at a couple double updates because I need to get this done by Christmas or I'll just about lose my mind. I'm in love with all of you and will respond to all comments on this and previous fics as soon as I possibly can!

All chapter titles are lyrics from Wonderland by Taylor Swift.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!